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(re)Presenting Suburbia: image and identity at the city’s edge

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Abstract

This paper presents the changing representation of suburbs and suburban culture during the 20th century and provides a global scan of new directions in suburban development and their implications for creating walkable cities.

The role of the suburb in the metropolis is not as clear as it once was. The edges between city and suburb, suburb and country, and between the core and periphery have become increasingly blurred in the polycentric city. This presentation will explore the representation of suburbs and suburbia in contemporary culture (film, literature, art) and map its changing culture. This is presented alongside the manner in which city design professionals have discussed suburbs. Weaving the two simultaneous discourses provides a deeper understanding of the suburbs, its culture and the opportunities for improving city sustainability in the broadest sense.

The presentation will demonstrate the way in which identity, geography, psychology, ecology, planning, population complexity and economy contribute to the complexity that is suburbs. It is vital that, as practitioners, we understand this complexity if we are to turn the visions of a new walkable culture into practice in the suburbs.

The presentation concludes with a discussion of new directions in the development of suburbs and provides a global scan of developers’ emerging trends including the introduction of irony in suburbia, transposing urban ideals to the suburban context, the play on nostalgia and the importance of ecology.

This paper, *(Re)presenting Suburbia: image and identity at the city’s edge*, draws on research undertaken by Kelvin Walsh as part of his Masters research thesis in the Metropolis postgraduate program in architecture and urban culture at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona and the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain.

Biography

Kelvin Walsh is the Manager of City Design and Place Making with Maribyrnong City Council (Victoria, Australia) where he is responsible for the municipality's urban design direction. He has extensive experience in collaborative city design processes, project evaluation and developing responsive approaches to ensure viable and implementable outcomes.

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SUBURBAN TRANSFORMATION IN THE POSTMETROPOLIS

Representing the city as a discrete geographical, economic, political, or social unit rooted in its immediate environs and hinterlands is becoming increasingly complicated. The boundaries of the city are becoming more porous, making it difficult to draw definitive lines between “city” and the “non-city” of suburbia or countryside. Likewise, the boundaries between one metropolitan city-region and another, and between the natural and the artificial, are also blurring. As a consequence we need to reconceptualise the relationship and interdependence between suburb and city.

CHANGES IN THE MODERN METROPOLIS

In his book *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* geographer Edward Soja describes the transformations of the modern metropolis as “a simultaneous implosion and explosion in the scale of cities, an extraordinary far-reaching turning of cityspace both inside-out and outside-in at the same time.” As a result, places that were once clearly “elsewhere” to the city are now within its symbolic reach. This increasing blurriness not only occurs in the physical city but also in the imagined city – “the city” is as much an imaginary or simulated reality as a real place. As such, “city” qualities are being brought to bear on places traditionally considered beyond its physical bounds.

This new complexity is bringing about radical change in the cultural politics of cityspace, highlighting in new ways the practical and theoretical meaning of difference, identity, subjectivity, multiplicity, integration; as well as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and so on. Old binary categories such as black/white, man/woman, capital/labour, colonizer/colonized are breaking down and becoming reconstituted in ways that we are only beginning to understand. However, the key transformations appear to be in simultaneous interplay of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization”.

So, how do we make sense of the theoretical and practical effects of contemporary urbanization processes? What are their spatial implications? Soja identifies three frameworks to help us understand what is happening. The first provides an insight into the causes of the postmetropolitan transformations – the restructuring of the geopolitical economy of urbanization and the globalization, and localization, of capital, labour and culture. The second examines the urban implications and outcomes of globalization where we see the simultaneous turning inside-out and outside-in of the modern metropolis together with the restructured and fragmented social mosaic of the city. The third shows how the postmetropolis has survived turbulent and potentially socially divisive globalization and economic transformations. In Soja's notion of the Carceral Archipelago we see the predominance of police over polis in response to the ecology of fear and in Simcities we see a blurring of the boundaries between the real and imagined and increasing emphasis on the hyperreality of everyday life.

RE CONCEPTUALISED SUBURBS – THE NEW COMPLEXITY

What does it mean for the suburbs? The changing structures of the postmetropolis mean that the metropolis can no longer be thought of as core and periphery, as city and suburb. Rather, it has evolved into what Lars Lerup calls a more complex ‘megashape’. Others who have explored this transformation include Rem Koolhaas in his 1995 *Generic City* and Peter Marcuse in his work on the new idealizing of suburbia. Common across this work is the sense that, given the economic, social and spatial changes expressed in the multi-centred postmetropolis, the suburbs have a new importance in the lives of city inhabitants. In many respects this is the consolidation of a pattern that commenced in the 1970s, but resulted in suburban instability in the 1980s and into the 1990s.

A number of effects emerge from the suburb’s new status. Firstly, the “identity” of an area has become a mantra, resulting in individual expression being compromised as the weight of conformity evens out the terrain. In many instances this identity is merely lip service. Image becomes everything as history is recast and memories are invented. Secondly, there is a constant tension between the desire to maintain “a certain distance” from neighbours and, simultaneously, to overcome the increasing distances of the postmetropolis “megashape”. Maintaining distance is related to perceived need for security from others, difference from nature and protection from alien things. Consequently we are seeing a return to the city fortress, but at the scale of the subdivision, as housing developments are increasingly being built as a cocoon, with “lock living” a preoccupation. Thirdly, with development sites still generally understood as a *tabula rasa*, and the wilderness/virgin field still seen as something to be tamed, the city ecology is composed of three primary elements – roads, buildings, nature. Sprawl continues in an explosion of beige (architectural banality) and the suburban megashape is a place where planning makes no difference. However, the old horizontality is being replaced by a vertical sprawl. Fourthly, the occupants of the new metropolis are multiracial and multicultural and always on the move. The postmetropolis is inhabited by those who don’t like it elsewhere, but are on their way there anyway. Finally, the changing economy – including blurring of domestic and work space with the home/office and the rise of shopping as the only valid pastime – means that commodified living is a type of control of expression. A perpetuating system is ensured through built-in redundancy.

DIRECTIONS FOR SUBURBIA

These effects are manifested in a number of recurring directions in contemporary suburban development: there is an attempt to transplant the urban to the suburban setting; new focus is being placed on distance, isolation and community building; nostalgia seeks to recall the good old days; there is an increased importance placed on the presence of nature; and ironic cues inform design. Examples of what these directions might mean in practice can be found in suburban developments across Australia, Europe and North America.

Urban dreaming

One of Australia’s largest residential land developers has developed what it terms a ‘breakthrough in new housing’ with its Warehouse Living range. The Warehouses mimic the inner city industrial built form that is extremely popular for gentrification and inner urban living. However, in this case Delfin LendLease has located the inner city typology 22 kilometres from the Melbourne CBD. In the developer’s words the:

“... modern Warehouse designs suit the trend towards a more urban lifestyle. ... Designed specifically for Delfin LendLease communities across Australia, the Delfin Warehouses will be sited along specially designed, tree-lined Warehouse lanes, reminiscent of historic inner-city laneways.” (www.delfincarolinesprings.com.au)

This might be read as an indicator of developer’s desire to “urbanize” suburbia.

Searching for community

Western Australia’s Community Code – now retitled *Liveable Neighbourhoods* (June 2000) – sets the standards and establishes the government development policies for subdivision and structure planning within the state. It responds to the “changing needs of the Western Australian community for providing for high-quality, recreational and living environments that are environmentally sustainable” (WAPC, 2000; iii). Central to *Liveable Neighbourhoods* is the importance of community. In fact, the first element is titled Community Design, which strategically positions the importance of community ahead of traditional structure planning concerns such as movement networks, lot layouts, public parklands, urban water management and utilities. The importance of community within place filters through the entire document.

Hometown nostalgia

In their 1998 paper “A Critique of New Urbanism” Peter Gordon and Harry Richardson describe how nostalgia is influencing suburban development globally: “... many New Urbanist projects are so influenced by the nostalgic longing for the archetypical small town of the past that they fall into the trap of believing that recreating its physical structure (at least to some degree) can simultaneously recreate its social and civic behaviour.” This supports David Harvey who, a year earlier, claimed that New Urbanism “builds an image of community and a rhetoric of place-based civic pride and consciousness for those who do not need it, while abandoning those that do to their ‘underclass’ fate.” Curiously, the New Urbanist movement typifies the desire to recreate a history that never was. It perpetuates the myth of suburban tranquility.

Nature and ecology

The importance of nature and ecology is a recurring theme of the suburbs. Many suburban developers are now using nature and ecology in the representation of their product. A scan of developer’s web sites from Australian and the United States shows how “nature” has, in effect, become a marketing tool employed by developers to demonstrate the quality of their product.

Reintroducing irony

Hagen Island is a new residential area on the periphery of The Hague designed by MVRD between 1998 and 2002. The project is an ironic interpretation of the suburban vernacular in a European context. The houses are stiffly ordered in groups of two, three or four leaving continuous open spaces between the clusters. Suburban traditionalism is evident in the form but this is subverted through the material selection and application where each block is clad in a single material – red roof tiles, blue polyurethane panels, wood and aluminium sheeting. The apparent rigorous order reflects standardized suburban development but cleverly critiques it.

These examples, and the effects they make manifest, point to a series of prevalent attitudes to suburban development, many of which give cause for concern.

The image is vital – through representation observers obtain first glimpses of a new trend. In suburbia and suburban development some ‘blurring’ occurs between the representation and the actuality, which begs the question: Is it the image or the reality that is most important?

New trends frequently promote myths about how things once were. New Urbanism and urbanizing suburbia tap desires for a time that never was and a compactness of a city now passed. So in their specificity these new developments reveal generic qualities of suburbia that is familiar to many.

Increasingly, the city is conceived as a production line with developers forever seeking greater efficiencies while building in redundancies, which ensure that consumerism will always have a place in suburbia. The momentum of the development machine makes it difficult to provide alternatives. And even when apparent alternatives are proposed, closer examination often reveals more of the same. Despite frequent claims of improvement, refinement and responsiveness there is little diversity and little choice in most current suburban development.

However, despite these concerns, the postmetropolis also offers great potential. Increasing diversity, greater flexibility, blurred boundaries and other attributes of the postmetropolis offer untold opportunities for its occupants. Architects and city designers in Australia must look beyond the Victa motor mowers and Hills hoists of our collective back yard and boldly engage with the suburbs to find new housing typologies, new density models and reinterpret vernacular patterns that sit well in the urbanised suburbs of the postmetropolis. MVRDV has provided clues to opportunities afforded in material selection and form making but the real challenge in Australia is to embrace the “reterritorialization” of the postmetropolis and develop a new suburban form ... a hybrid suburban / urban / (sub)urban.

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