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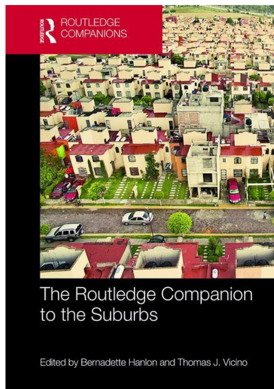

The Routledge Companion to the Suburbs

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Defining suburbs

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1
Defining suburbs

Ann Forsyth

The problem of definition

What is a suburb? In the coming decades, billions of people will move to urban areas and many will live in areas that are already considered suburban. How many people, and what that means, depends heavily on how suburbs are defined. As a vibrant literature on framing in planning work suggests, how urbanists, the press, and the public talk and think about the suburbs shapes how they can see such areas being developed and redeveloped in the future (Caplan and Nelson, 1973; Schon and Rein, 1994; Harvard Law Review Association, 2004; Healey, 2009). In the coming decades, as new suburban areas are built and older suburbs head toward redevelopment, clearer definitions, or better alternatives to the term "suburb," can help focus academic and practical debates on important issues.

In 1958, Kurtz and Eichler published an article in *Social Forces* complaining about confusion over "residence categories" and, in particular, the terms "suburb" and "fringe." As they pointed out, when concepts are not clear it is hard to create an adequate theory. The situation has not improved much in subsequent decades. As Lineberry (1975, p. 2) argued in the mid-1970s, "despite the voluminous literature on suburbia, we are no closer than ever to a definition. It is a mere assumption of convenience that we all know what we are talking about, however variegated the pictures in our heads." While Lineberry attempted to provide some clarity, decades later Harris, reviewing the international literature on suburbs, still complained that the field needed to establish a "minimum definition to which suburbs everywhere conform" (Harris, 2010, p. 26). Among urban scholars, then, there is no consensus as to what exactly constitutes a suburb and the confusion expands when one includes popular and media accounts.

This chapter examines the range of suburban definitions. These include definitions focused on the physical, functional, social, and process dimensions as well as others that take a more analytical or critical view. Obviously, definitions of terms such as suburbs are social constructions or deliberate abstractions, focusing attention on some aspects of suburbs and not others. Several related areas in urban studies – primarily urban planning, urban history, urban sociology, and urban geography – have generated many of the definitions, demonstrating disciplinary differences. For example, historians strive to define suburbs in a way that makes sense over time and urban sociologists are particularly concerned about social relations. Those working in low-income countries often

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use an overlapping term – peri-urban development – that most commonly refers to the urban or suburban fringe but may also refer to closer areas (Adell, 1999; Iaquinta and Drescher, 1999).

Given this multiplicity, one approach is to abandon the word "suburb" and replace it with terms referring to specific types of suburbs or particular features, such as density. This has some advantages in terms of reducing ambiguity. However, it can also be argued that focusing on key dimensions misses the big picture of metropolitan growth and change.

Finally, it should be noted that a number of authors either reject the term "suburb" as obsolete or propose that it is impossible to define suburbs due to their diversity (Archer, 2005, p. 440). The former group has proposed alternative types of "post-suburban" environments such as technoburbs and urban realms (Phelps, 2015; Teaford, 2008, p. x; Webber, 1964). They have a point, particularly if they continue to define suburbs as primarily residential and middle-class. For the purposes of this review, however, I have included these post-suburban environments as types of suburbs and dealt with them under various dimensions. As I note, alternatives to the residential suburbs have been part of the scholarly debate on suburbs for almost a century, so the idea of the non-residential post-suburban environment is really not so new.

For those wishing to define suburbs as a whole, the most practical approaches are based on the suburbs' outer locations in the metropolis and their relative newness. These two dimensions provide a somewhat distinctive range of opportunities and problems in suburbs including potentially limited access to services, newer social networks, closeness to undeveloped or rural areas, and often lower-cost of land.

In identifying definitions, I encountered a difficulty. Surprisingly few people who write about suburbs define them explicitly as a whole – including many classic, influential, and otherwise important works on suburbs. Some focus on specific types of suburbs, defining them quite clearly but not dealing with suburbs more generally – for example, authors may focus on ethnoburbs, technoburbs, suburban master-planned communities, or streetcar suburbs. Some of my own work has taken this form. Others define suburbs through examples by applying the term suburban to particular places or characteristics from which the reader can deduce a definition. However, it is hard to piece together a comprehensive definition from such accounts. Yet, others focus on areas that are clearly suburban by many definitions – for example, new developments of detached housing on the urban fringe. However, they do not pay much attention to articulating whether other kinds of developments are also suburban.

In order to locate more explicit and comprehensive definitions, I started by reviewing sources likely to define suburbs, such as census agency manuals. I looked at books on suburbs, searching via the combined library catalog, Worldcat. In addition, I located literature using Google Scholar, applying key words such as variants on the terms "suburb" and "definition." I also searched using questions such as, "What is a suburb?" I started with Google Scholar because it picks up a wider variety of sources than, for example, Web of Knowledge (ISI/Thompson). One assessment in social work found it located four times the number of disciplinary journals (Hodge and Lacasse, 2011). It also is very simple to search for works that have cited a particular piece. However, I also checked my search against several other databases including Web of Knowledge, Summon (a database aggregator used by libraries – my library had 800 million references in the database), and the Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals. Combined, these other databases added four more relevant references, all from Summon.

In this way, I traced a range of authors who defined suburbs. More important, I examined the articles and books they cited and located works that cited the sources I had found. Some of these also provided definitions. I did not intend to inventory every work defining suburbs but rather to show the range of definitions across the century in which the urban studies literature has grappled with the phenomenon of suburbanization. A number of definitional issues – such as whether suburbs are essentially residential or can contain employment areas – are long-standing, but that situation is not always obvious from recent debates. While drawing mainly on work from

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the United States, United Kingdom, and Australasia, where possible, this chapter extends more globally within the English-language literature.

Why definitions matter

Why does better defining suburbs matter for urban studies and planning? People have been discussing and studying suburbs for decades without any consistent definition, so perhaps there is no need for one. There are a number of reasons, however, why it is important to define suburbs clearly.

First is the issue of action. As Caplan and Nelson (1973, p. 200) pointed out some decades ago in the context of social problems, "What is done about a problem depends on how it is defined" (Schon and Rein, 1994; Healey, 2009). For example, if suburbs in the United States are seen as essentially white and middle-class or elite, policymakers may pay less attention to the real achievements and problems of African American suburban residents or low-income suburbs. If they are seen as essentially automobile-dependent, the many examples of transit-oriented suburbs may be ignored. In public debates, people may talk past one another.

Second is the problem of research and theory. Conducting empirical research requires adequate definitions of features and concepts being measured. As Kurtz and Eichler (1958) argued in the 1950s, it is difficult to develop an adequate theory of suburbs if terms are not clearly defined. If one study defines suburbs as metropolitan municipalities outside the central city and another as places that are dominated by detached housing, they will be examining different areas, making comparisons and generalizations more difficult. While researchers may themselves be careful about such issues, those using research findings may well miss these subtle differences and misinterpret the implications.

Finally, even if one does not consider that clear definitions matter for theory and practice, it is still worthwhile to review the variety of definitions to help reduce confusion in the field. Such a review provides scholars, students, and practitioners with a roadmap for identifying the perspectives of contributors to debates about suburbs.

Forms of definitions

Analyzing how suburbs are defined is not easy because the methods of constructing those definitions vary quite a bit, even among those authors who define suburbs explicitly. Table 1.1 explains some of these differences.

First, is whether the definition proposes what a suburb is (also called a positive definition) or focuses on what it is not or what it lacks (also called negative). This is not the same as whether the author likes suburbs or not. A positive definition of a suburb may focus on aspects of suburbia seen as problematic by the analyst (e.g., that it is automobile-oriented); similarly, a negative definition of what a suburb lacks may focus on the absence of problems.

Table 1.1 Approaches to defining suburbs explicitly

	Core essence	*Features and types (family resemblance)*
What a suburb is/positive	Example: LOW-DENSITY primarily residential areas	Example: First, second, and third ring suburbs; suburbs as low-density, with detached houses, middle-class families, substantial open space, and scattered employment
What a suburb lacks/negative	Example: Suburbs are within metropolitan areas (not rural) and outside the central cities (not core)	Example: Not cultured, not diverse, unequal, not dense

Second, and cutting across this first issue, is whether the definition focuses on a core essence of "suburbanity," for example, that all suburbs, or the most typical suburbs, have low densities and are primarily residential, or lists a set of features or types of suburbs that hang together with a family resemblance (Wittgenstein, 2009). Many definitions revolving around features and types are quite complex, which is part of the reason they were not reduced to an essence.

Several key topics often appear in definitions of suburbs, whatever the approach. Table 1.2 demonstrates some of these; these reflect definitions of suburbs as a whole. What is obvious from the short listing, however, is how varied the dimensions are and how potentially complicated definitions become when dimensions are combined.

Table 1.2 Key dimensions for defining suburbs with examples of definitions

Dimension	*Brief description*	*Examples*
Physical (where, what)		
Location	Where the suburbs are within a metropolitan area	Suburbs as on the outskirts of a town; definition unofficially derived from U.S. census – suburbs as within metropolitan areas but outside of core cities
Built environment characteristics	Key physical features related to development patterns or building and landscape types	Suburbs as having large areas of low-density detached houses
Functional (operations)		
Transportation	How people access and get around in suburbs	Suburbs as automobile-oriented
Activities	Functions and uses of the place	Suburbs as mainly residential developments with segregated uses
Social (who)		
Political places	Defined by municipal or similar boundaries	U.S. definition of suburbs as municipalities outside the core city
Sociocultural	The population character, level of exclusivity, and cultural heritage and tastes	Suburbs as middle-class or exclusive; a suburban way of life
Process (how, when)		
Styles of building, design, and planning	Who builds; the level of planning in terms of amounts of control and scale of planning unit	Suburbs as incremental and speculative developments
Time	Relates to relative newness, or its period of development	Suburbs as areas from the period since World War II
Analytical		
Critical assessments	Suburbs seen as problematic	Suburbs as sprawling, conformist, isolating, elite, locationally disadvantaged, and/or ugly places
Indices and indicators	Defined using criteria combined into some kind of indicator	Sprawl indices, fiscal capacity classifications

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Many definitions of suburbs as a whole incorporate several dimensions at once. Some examples below provide a flavor of these combinations; the dimensions they represent are indicated in Table 1.3. While the focus of this chapter is on single dimensions, many definitions combine at least two of them. For example:

- Gober and Behr (1982) used discriminant analysis to check the importance of nine characteristics thought to distinguish suburbs from core cities in the United States, including age and family status, ethnicity, income, density, auto-orientation, housing age, and employment in manufacturing, retail, and services. They found race and ethnicity to be the most important variable distinguishing central cities and suburbs in the U.S. at the time.

  (Gober and Behr, 1982)

- Harris and Larkham (1999) used historical and geographical approaches to note five characteristics of suburbia focusing on North America and the United Kingdom: 1) peripheral location; 2) residential character; 3) low-density with perhaps high levels of owner occupancy; 4) a distinctive way of life; 5) separate identities for communities often at the municipal level.
- Writing a decade later and attempting to provide a truly global definition, Harris recast suburbs as having three dimensions internationally – 1) "peripheral location;" 2) (usually) having "residential densities intermediate between those of the city and the country;" and 3) relative "newness."

  (Harris, 2010, pp. 27, 29)

- Johnson (2006, p. 261), a geographer working in Australia, saw Harris and Larkham's (1999) definition as being relevant but added her own classic definition: "The idea of a single storied, freestanding dwelling on a relatively large allotment, in a mainly residential area, with strong local identity and limited governance, located midway between the city center and rural lands, where women tend to children and community while their husbands journeyed elsewhere for paid work, encapsulates the Australian suburb." The expansion of Australian cities, she pointed out, had provided an array of different types, so that in major Australian cities, suburbs had fundamentally departed from this definition.

  (Johnson, 2006, p. 261)

- Journalist Flint (2006, p. 2), focusing on the situation in the United States, simply described "suburbia – spread-out, drive-thru, car-dependent, newer-the-better suburbia." This simple definition combines the dimension of density, newness, and dominant transportation mode.

Table 1.3 Example definitions categorized by dimensions dealt with

	Locational	*Physical characteristics*	*Transportation*	*Activities*	*Political places*	*Sociocultural*	*Styles of building, planning, design*	*Time*	*Critical assessments*	*Indices*
Gober and Behr (1982)		x	x	x		x	x			x
Harris and Larkham (1999)	x	x		x		x				
Harris (2010)	x	x						x		
Johnson (2006)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Flint (2006)		x	x				x			

Table 1.4 Example continua of suburban types

Dimension	*Extreme 1*		*Extreme 2*
Sociocultural	Socially homogenous		Socially mixed
Sociocultural	Residence by choice for all groups		Economic and/or regulatory exclusion; resettlement
Sociocultural	Low-cost		High-income elite developments
Style	Large-scale developer/builders	Middle sized builders doing small subdivisions	Build by owner
Style	Planned at a neighborhood or town scale		Incremental, informal
Style	Fitting in well-designed regional plan		Not fitting any regional plan, poor regional plan
Style	Highly designed neighborhoods	Design for major buildings/spaces	Little overall design or planning input
Style	Popular aesthetics		Elite aesthetics
Style	Interspersed with or adjacent to "natural" areas		Heavily urbanized

It is obvious that different authors have different emphases related to their substantive interests and the countries they are studying. They also reflect the changing character of suburbs over time – both in one location such as the Australian suburbs described by Johnson, and between places.

Not all definitions are essentialist. Some that can be better seen as locating a family resemblance list features and types of suburbs. Table 1.4 provides a small sampling of these features for just two dimensions. For example, suburbs may vary from socially homogenous to socially mixed in terms of their sociocultural character, and in terms of style may be built at a large-scale by a developer or house by house by an owner. Combining just these two dimensions creates an amazing variety of suburban types, most of which actually exist, e.g., both large-scale homogenous and socially mixed suburbs, and built-by-owner homogenous or mixed suburbs. One form of definition would list these types.

Dimensions

A less complicated way to analyze this situation is to look at it one dimension at a time.

Location

Suburb is not a new word but rather comes from the Latin *suburbium*, or "under the city," with a plural *suburbia*. The Oxford English Dictionary's (OED) first definition of suburb refers to suburbs as a location with examples dating from the late fourteenth century. "The country lying immediately outside a town or city; more particularly, those residential parts belonging to a town or city that lie immediately outside and adjacent to its walls or boundaries" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2011a; McManus and Ethington, 2007, pp. 319–320). Suburb could mean both a

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literal place as well as the figurative outskirts of something such as a place, idea, or event (examples include the "suburbs" of Lent, of a narration, of sense).

At their most basic, then, suburbs are outside of a town or city but belonging to it (Frost, 1991). But what does this mean? It in part depends on where the boundary or wall between inside and outside a town or city is located, between what is urban and what is rural.

In the field of urban studies, the city or town is typically the whole metropolitan area, which defines urban as being everything that is not rural or wild. The U.S. census has been changing its definition of urban over the years but has a similar characterization. By 2010, the definition of an urban area was

> a densely settled core of census tracts and/or census blocks that meet minimum population density requirements, along with adjacent territory containing non-residential urban land uses as well as territory with low population density included to link outlying densely settled territory with the densely settled core.
>
> *(U.S. Census Bureau, 2010)*

Urban census tracts have less than 3 square miles in area and population density of at least a thousand per square mile, with a minimum population of 2,500 people. Rural areas are all nonurban locations.

While the U.S. census does not define suburbs, many analysts have made a rough approximation by taking the urban (metropolitan) area and subtracting census-defined central city municipalities. This approach works better in areas with many local governments than in places like Texas, where annexations mean that many central cities take up much of the metropolitan areas. According to calculations published by Statistics Canada, if a similar definition were used in Canada, only 8 percent of Calgary's population and 9 percent of Winnipeg's would be suburban, but 73 percent of Vancouver's would be (Turcotte, 2008).

A major difficulty with a locational definition is that urban areas come in a lot of different shapes and sizes. One estimate is that there are 50,000 urban areas in the world – but some are quite small and a suburb in a town of 5,000 is different in character to one in a city of five million (Satterthwaite, 2007a, 2007b). Suburbs have been developed for a very long-time now; is a place that was on the urban edge 50 or 100 years ago still a suburb, even if it has a classic suburban form or is in a non-central municipality?

In part to get around this problem, Fishman (1987, p. 117) distinguishes between a suburb, defined by location, and a "true suburb . . .[that] must embody in its design a 'marriage of town and country,' a distinct zone set apart from by the solid rows of city streets and from rural fields." That is for "true" suburbs, he rejects a purely locational definition in favor of one based on physical characteristics and styles of building, design, and planning. Lineberry (1975) distinguishes between locational definitions from the U.S. census and cultural definitions like those of Johnson (2006) above – related to family type, segregation of home and work, and so on. He points out that, at least up to the 1970s, the two definitions were often "confused" (Lineberry, 1975, p. 3).

For those who want to keep a locational definition but make it more nuanced and useful for comparative study, one approach is to imagine the city as rings around a core with variously inner (or first), middle (or second), and outer (third) ring suburbs (Johnson, 2006; Green Leigh and Lee, 2005). Gans (1968, p. 49) provides such a definition, comparing the inner-city, the outer city of "stable residential areas that house the working-and middle-class tenant and owner," and the suburbs that are "the latest and most modern ring of the outer city, distinguished from it only by yet lower densities and by the often irrelevant fact of the ring's location outside the city limits." It is often unclear how much these outer suburbs overlap with those areas termed the

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suburban fringe, the peri-urban fringe, or the exurbs (Adell, 1999). In Canada, the statistical agency has tried to operationalize this kind of definition as rings of a certain distance from the census tract containing the city hall of the most central municipality, with rings out a certain number of kilometers – that is, 0–5, 5–9, etc. (Turcotte, 2008, p. 5). However, this raises the issue of what distances to use.

Built environment characteristics

Some people know suburbs when they see them because they have certain features that can be identified with the naked eye – detached housing, single-story factories and warehouses, campus-style low-rise office complexes, strip mall shopping centers, and large-scale shopping malls. For example, Dunham-Jones and Williamson (2009, p. x) describe suburbs as dominated by lower-density, single-use private buildings designed as objects in a landscape and funded or built by short-term investors such as real estate investment trusts and larger scale home builders; transportation is auto-oriented, with a looped and cul-de-sac network. Others discuss a landscape between the city and the country in form as well as location (Harris, 2010; Fishman, 1987).

Density is one favored characteristic for at least partially defining suburbs physically because it seems to be meaningful and easy to measure. Authors, however, differ as to whether to measure population, employment, or housing unit density; and if density gradients are most important (Gans, 2009; Sridhar, 2004; Harris, 2010). Some early suburbs were denser than the center cities, even in the United States; worldwide there are a number such examples today (Borchert, 1996; Harris, 2010). There are also related concepts such as building intensity (e.g., building bulk), building type, and perceived density that might be relevant in definitions (Forsyth et al., 2007).

Statistics Canada has attempted to construct a definition related to density and housing type: "we will refer to a neighborhood as low-density when at least two-thirds of the occupied housing stock comprises single and semi-detached houses and mobile homes, that is, dwellings that take up the most space or area per occupant" (Turcotte, 2008, p. 6). They chose this to deal with large census tracts with lots of non-residential uses that might be high-density in the residential portions but low-density overall. Density-based definitions have strengths in focusing on issues relevant to policymakers (i.e., issues they can regulate), and that are relatively easy to measure (if researchers can agree on what kind of density to assess).

Transportation

Closely related to definitions based on physical features are functional definitions, prominently definitions related to means of gaining access to suburbs. These are related to locational definitions but foreground linkages to the core city. Clapson, in a review of definitions, cites a common version, defining suburbs as "beyond the heart of the town . . . [but] within its urban orbit" (that is within commuting distance), with a "geography . . . intermediate between the town center and the countryside," and also depending on the town center for "shopping, leisure, and other requirements" (Clapson, 2003, p. 2; Thorns, 1972; Douglass, 1925; see review in Schnore, 1957). Earlier, Douglass (1925, p. 8) had defined as suburban lower-density locations from which "the heart of the city can be reached conveniently, quickly, and at low-cost." This is a viable definition in smaller areas, though its underlying assumptions are less tenable in larger polycentric cities.

Others are less worried about what suburbs have in common in terms of transportation but how they are shaped by a dominant mode. For many authors, suburbs are primarily automobile-based, e.g., "spread-out, drive-thru, car-dependent, newer-the-better suburbia" (Flint, 2006, p. 2). However, collective transportation – from railways and buses to vans and shared taxis – has also

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provided access to and around suburbs (Warner, 1978). Suburbs could then be defined as the sum of different types, e.g., streetcar suburbs plus automobile-based suburbs. This issue obviously overlaps in important ways with critical assessments as many authors (critically) equate suburbia with automobile-based sprawl.

Activities

A common approach when considering activities has been to see suburbs as primarily residential, providing bedroom areas for the larger metropolis. Others add that it must also be "well off, and marked by single-family homes" (Garreau, 1991, p. 149). This view of suburbs as mostly residential was never the whole picture as even residential areas needed shops, schools, the offices of local professionals and tradespeople, faith communities, and such. Many industries suburbanized early and people maintained some rural activities in early suburban areas (Fogelsong, 2005). But for many this definition of the primarily residential suburb was compelling, particularly through the 1960s.

Of course, suburbs are now more varied and a number of non-residential suburban types have become prominent. Over the past century, authors have argued for new terms to identify non-residential or mixed-use suburban areas. In 1925, Douglass distinguished between suburbs of "production" and "consumption" (Douglass, 1925, pp. 74–92; Harris, 1943; Berger, 1960). In the 1950s, Schnore proposed that "residential suburbs" be distinguished from "employing satellites" (Schnore, 1957, p. 122; Berger, 1960). Many of the areas labeled "post-suburbia" are mixed-use areas or job centers (although some are declining suburbs) (Kling et al., 1991; Lucy and Phillips, 2000, pp. 4–6; Wu and Phelps, 2008; Garreau, 1991). Fishman (1987, p. 184) coined the term

> technoburb . . . [for a] peripheral zone, perhaps as large as a county, that has emerged as a viable socioeconomic unit. . . . Its residents look to their immediate surroundings rather than the [core] city for their jobs and other needs; and its industries find not only the employees they need but also the specialized services.

However, others have continued to use the term suburb; for example, Hartshorn and Muller (1992) call edge city type environments "suburban downtowns."

Some authors focus on the mix of activities in suburbs. For example, Duany et al.'s (2000, p. 3) *Suburban Nation* contrasts "suburban sprawl" with "traditional neighborhoods," both in suburban locations and presumably making up a large percentage of suburban areas in the United States. The traditional neighborhood involves "mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly communities of varied population, either standing free as villages or grouped into towns and cities" (Duany et al., 2000, p. 4). Suburban sprawl in contrast is made up of five "homogenous components" – subdivisions, shopping centers, office parks, civic institutions, and roadways – "which can be arranged in almost any way" (Duany et al., 2000, p. 5). As they claim: "They are polar opposites in appearance, function, and character: they look different, act differently, and they affect us in different ways." Overall such activity-based definitions have been evolving quite quickly.

Political places

Suburbs may also be defined as municipalities or neighborhoods with some political or administrative role. The OED has examples of such usage from the mid-fifteenth century: "2. Any of such residential parts, having a definite designation, boundary, or organization" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2011b). In the United States, a suburban municipality is outside the core city. While

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this definition is dealt with in the locational section, part of the reason this definition has been used so much is it deals with political culture and activities as well. Some authors see this political independence as being core to the concept of suburbs (Beauregard, 2006). As Teaford describes:

> For Americans the notion of city limits has been vital to the concept of suburbia. . . . Because of the strong tradition of local self-rule in the United States, this political distinction between suburb and central city has been vital to discussions of suburban development, lifestyle, and policy. American suburbs are not simply peripheral areas with larger lawns and more trees than districts nearer the historic hub. They are governmentally independent political units that can employ the powers of the state to distinguish themselves from the city.
> *(Teaford, 2008, pp. ix–x)*

Sociocultural

The sociocultural dimension is a prominent one in many definitions. As Healy (1994, p. xiii) states in the introduction to a collection of essays on Australian suburbs, "the terms 'suburb' and 'suburbia' have functioned as imagined spaces on to which a vast array of fears, desires, insecurities, obsessions, and yearnings have been projected and displaced."

Some of these definitions overlap a great deal with styles of building. For example, Fava's (1956, p. 34) "Suburbanism as a way of life" pointed out that suburbs share three sets of traits: "more than their disproportionate share of young married couples and their children," "made up largely of families of middle-class status," and with certain physical qualities such as "private" (detached) houses, low densities, and open spaces. As Nicolaides and Wiese (2006, p. 7) describe in their introduction to the *Suburb Reader*, such features support a way of life: "places shaped by elevated values for home ownership, secluded nuclear families, privacy, a distinctive, gendered division of labor, social exclusivity, semirural landscapes, dislike of cities, political home rule, etc." Some scholars emphasize the economic and regulatory tools for creating and maintaining this conformity (Grant and Mittelstead, 2004), but these are rarely posed as definitions (Fogelsong, 2005).

A subset of such sociocultural definitions examines the intersection between social and physical dimensions, focusing on "Western" style suburbs in low- and middle-income countries. For example, King (2004) describes as suburban middle- and upper middle-class villas in Asia, particularly those with European or North American themes (also Fishman, 2003). As Harris (2010) points out, lower-income squatter settlements, even ones in suburban locations in such countries, are rarely described as suburbs. In contrast, in places such as Europe and Australasia, suburban poverty and "locational disadvantage" in suburban public housing and other low-income areas are key concerns (Maher, 1994). Obviously, this is an area demanding more clarity.

Suburbs are also not all socially homogenously middle class. For decades scholars have emphasized how suburbs attract migrants from rural areas who wanted cheap land where they could incrementally build their own houses, grow some of their own food, or work in suburban manufacturing (Berger, 1960; Nicolaides and Wiese, 2006). Others have pointed to growing communities of international migrants, lower-income groups, gay households, and other diverse populations moving to suburbs. Still others propose a mixture related to settlement age – e.g., people residing in villages and towns swallowed up by a metropolitan area. As Teaford remarks (2008), with perhaps a little boosterism:

> American suburbs include some of the nation's most densely populated communities, as well as areas zoned to accommodate more horses than human beings. Suburbia reflects the ethnic

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> diversity of America more accurately than the central cities, providing homes for Hispanics, Asians, and blacks as well as non-Hispanic whites. It comprises slums as well as mansions, main streets as well as malls, skyscrapers as well as schools. Some suburbs are particularly gay-friendly; others are planned for senior citizens. Some are known for their fine schools; others are examples of educational failure.
>
> *(Teaford, 2008, pp. xiii–xiv)*

As Nicolaides and Wiese (2006) explain, this diversity within and between suburbs has challenged earlier definitions, particularly in the field of history in the United States:

> The most intensive argument has pivoted around questions of class and race: Was a suburb only a suburb when it was white and middle or upper class? Pioneering scholars in the field . . . implied that the answer was yes. . . . By the 1990s, however, suburban 'revisionists' had begun to challenge this 'orthodox' version of suburbia for what it omitted: in particular, industry, multifamily housing, blue-collar workers, ethnic and racial minorities, and the poor.
>
> *(Nicolaides and Wiese, 2006, pp. 7–8)*

Globally, suburban public housing estates, industrial worker suburbs, and self-build suburbs (including squatter settlements, shantytowns, mobile home parks, and low-cost subdivisions) also make it hard to defend a view of suburbs as essentially white and affluent (Harris, 2010; Forsyth, 2013). The alternative in some fields has been a definition based on suburbanization, or the process of decentralization of jobs and housing, whether voluntary or involuntary (Nicolaides and Wiese, 2006, p. 8). However, as more people are "suburban-born and bred," and many more move directly to suburbs bypassing the core city, such a definition based on decentralization may need to be enlarged (Fava, 1975, p. 10; Harris, 2010).

Styles of building, design, and planning

Key to how new homeowners interact with suburban developments, and how urban planners and designers think about them, is how the developments are designed and built (Forsyth and Crewe, 2009a). Many authors have pointed out how suburbs meld town and countryside in a unique blend (Fishman, 1987; Archer, 2011). This is a central tenet of the garden tradition of suburban design (Howard, 1902).

How this blend is achieved depends on how suburbs get constructed. Many suburban homes are built one by one to the specifications of the owner, or indeed by the owner over time. Others are built by developers and builders in subdivisions of various scales, and with different levels of fit in various neighborhood, municipal, or regional plans. Many now use prefabrication and other standard building techniques to keep costs down.

Criticisms of "suburbia" frequently focus on one or two aspects such as tract housing, which is how they define suburbia as exemplified by these problematic forms. At larger scale the great debate is over sprawl – thus overlapping with the critical assessment type of definition – whether suburbs are unplanned and incremental or planned to contribute positively to the region (Hayden, 2004, pp. 1–2).

Time

Along with density and location, Harris proposes "newness" as a key criterion for defining suburbs (Harris, 2010, p. 29). As he points out, however, some authors such as Clarke (1966) propose that this period of relative newness lasts only a few years, while others such as Whitzman

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(2009) give examples lasting many decades. One issue with such definitions is how to deal with older towns and villages that over time are surrounded by new suburban development, which functionally become suburbs.

Other definitions focus on development after a certain time period, for example post-World War II developments. This is often in combination with some other dimension such as location or building type (Forsyth, 2005). Such definitions are most useful in places like the United States where this has been a key period of suburbanization. An alternative is to define types of suburbs as the total of different periods of suburbs (Forsyth and Crewe, 2009b). Such historical classifications are rarely used to explicitly define suburbs, but suburbs are presumably made up of the sum total of the different types of suburbs (Lang et al., 2006; Hayden, 2003).

Critical assessments

Many definitions of suburbs are really catalogs of their ills. According to the OED, this kind of definition has been around at least since the seventeenth century, when suburban areas were seen as more lawless than the core city (Oxford English Dictionary, 2011b, def. 4). By the nineteenth century, the term "suburban" was used for those "having the inferior manners, the narrowness of view, etc., attributed to residents in suburbs" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2011b). As Barker (2009, p. 13) describes in his defense of British suburban life, for many in the press and design professions to "call anything or anyone 'suburban' is to utter a put-down, an anathema, a curse."

In such cases the commentator is frequently focusing on certain kinds of suburbs that have specific problems – social, aesthetic, environmental, or cultural. Other areas that under a locational definition would be classed as suburbs are defined as something else – small towns, employment areas, new towns, and so on. A cluster of urban design critiques point to the lack of urbanity in suburbs, with suburbs defined as lacking positive urban features (Montgomery, 1998).

There is a long and rich history of such critiques, with a number of authors providing substantial reviews of them (Eichler and Kaplan, 1967; Popenoe, 1977; Gans, 1963; Forsyth, 2005; Bruegmann, 2006). Of these more critical assessments, the ones that are most easy to defend are environmental critiques of suburbia as energy inefficient, land grabbing, and water quality eroding. But even these are hard to sustain across all suburbs. For example, any suburban areas are transit-oriented or else blend natural systems with development (Crewe and Forsyth, 2011). Overall, these are important "negative" definitions that specify through critique.

Indices

Finally, there are indices or indicators for defining and distinguishing suburbs – here again, suburbs are the sum total of different types. For example, Orfield (2002) used cluster analysis applied to almost 5,000 suburban places in the United States, distinguishing them according to fiscal capacity and location. He proposed six suburban clusters or types, including three "at risk" types (segregated, older, low-density), two types of suburban jobs centers (best off fiscally), and bedroom suburbs. Similarly, Mikelbank (2004) used cluster analysis to create a typology of U.S. census-defined suburbs based on demographic characteristics, economic variables, physical features, and some aspects of government. Data were drawn from the population, economic, and government censuses. From this, he created ten types of suburbs, ranging from traditional wealthy bedroom suburbs though working-class diverse suburbs (p. 950). Hanlon et al. (2009, p. 261) similarly developed an "index of suburban transformation" related to population, income, and poverty (see also Vicino, 2008).

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Sprawl indices that can distinguish suburbs from historic areas by features such as density and street pattern are another of this style (Ewing et al., 2002). These are useful and data rich ways of defining types of suburbs and could be further developed to define suburbs as a whole.

Conclusion

Given all the confusion around the term, one option is to give up on the term suburb. There are two ways to do this. The first is to replace it with more specific environmental types such as post-war subdivision, edge city, and office park. This has some potential among suburban experts who are typically aware that suburbs are quite diverse. In comparative work it may be easier to examine specific suburban types. Such an approach may, however, be a challenge for those working on more general processes of urban growth or speaking to the public. Terms such as neighborhood and community are similarly murky but also hard to give up completely.

A variation on the strategy is to focus on specific features such as location, density, or historical period of development and not use the term suburb. This is in fact quite often done in urban studies. Many research projects on, say, environments and health do not state that specific environments are suburban but rather that their street patterns are dominated by large blocks (and some such areas will of course be located in core cities, but more are likely to be in suburbs). This approach allows research variables to be clearly conceptualized. For example, Knapp and Zhao's (2009) overview of "Smart Growth and Urbanization in China" does not mention the term suburbs, though it is clearly dealing with development in suburban locations and it has a number of very compelling illustrations of outer urban development, freeways, and a low-density subdivision (Song and Ding, 2009). Rather, their paper deals with smart growth dimensions such as land use mix and farmland preservation. I have certainly used this strategy in my own work. However, non-experts can find it hard to interpret such variables, so researchers often have to provide examples using terms such as "suburban apartment area" or "low-density suburb."

Alternatively, it may be possible to keep the term. One way to do this is to better distinguish between types of suburbs – so that all references to suburbs are qualified by an adjective. This makes sense because different types of suburbs will have different problems and different planning needs. Many authors today deal with this situation by focusing on fairly clearly defined types of suburbs such as Fishman's (2003, p. 1) "American-style 'suburbs of prosperity'" or the "ethnoburb" (Li, 1998). If such suburbs are defined with some precision, then they could be the bases of conceptual models, larger theories, and thoughtful practice.

To define suburbs as a whole, rather than types of suburbs, is more complex. Following an extensive international review of suburban scholarship, Harris (2010) proposed a definition based on location, density, and newness. Of these, location and newness can be the most consistently applied. Even this definition raises questions about how far out and how new? A suburban index could, perhaps, help deal with some of these problems.

As urbanization continues, the term suburb represents a long-standing and viable term for describing development beyond the core city (Clapson and Hutchison, 2010). Alternatives such as "peri-urban" are no more clearly defined. Suburbs do have important features in common. Because of their location and relative newness, such locations are likely to have a particular range of functions, transportation modes, social characters, and physical features. More clearly distinguishing suburbs from other kinds of development, and different types of suburban environments, can help both those who want to understand suburbs and those involved in planning and (re)developing them.

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