

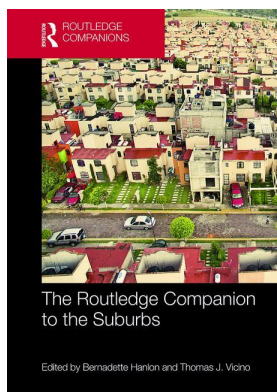
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## **The Routledge Companion to the Suburbs**

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### **The end of the suburbs**

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# The end of the suburbs

John Rennie Short

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## Introduction

Once upon a time there was a place called *Suburbia*. It was built on the edge of U.S. cities from 1945 to the early 1970s. Its emergence was driven by the demands of a growing white middle class, underwritten by the federal funding of roads and government support for the mortgage market. It was part cause and part effect of a post-war economic boom centered on domestic consumption, and the creation of a new and expanded middle class. It was predominantly white, and most homes were single-family dwellings with a marked separation between residential areas and commercial districts. It was the mythic counterpoint to the *Inner-City*, a place for immigrants and the poor, with mixed land use and lax morals; *Suburbia*, by contrast, was American and affluent, the embodiment of a new domestic economy and a nuclear family where a profane business world did not pollute the sacred site of family values. It was mile after mile of separate houses spread across the land. And the people were happy.

Well, not quite. *Suburbia* had its critics. There were the cultural critics who initially saw the suburbs as sites of conformity. Scholars such as Lewis Mumford were always a bit snifty about *Suburbia* and could never hide their distaste; it was too new and decidedly not urban. The very prefix “sub” indicated its inferiority. He described it “as an asylum for the preservation of illusion” (Mumford, 1961, p. 464). Later, as *Suburbia* became more pervasive and less associated with a new, gauche middle class and more a stand-in for the now, it was criticized as a place of rampant individualism, the setting for the unraveling of civic society’s fabric, a place where people retreated behind their remote-controlled garage doors, turned their backs on community, and held tight to the nexus of family connections (Putnam, 2000).

Then there was the equity argument. For those trapped in the Inner-City, *Suburbia* became something to aspire to, a bridgehead to the middle-class. To move to *Suburbia* was to be accepted as American. Opening up *Suburbia* became part of the struggle for civil rights (Downs, 1975).

There were the environmental criticisms. In the early years, the construction of houses across the landscape took place with limited environmental regulations and often less environmental sensitivity. Hills were razed, habitats were destroyed, and ecosystems disrupted as the geometry of the grid was imposed across the land. The increase in impermeable surfaces led to flooding. There was a loss of green space in the wake of low-density sprawl. The heavy reliance on motor

vehicles increased air pollution. The large doses of pesticides and fertilizers necessary to maintain the suburban lawns increased pollution and hastened the deaths of streams and rivers. The suburbs were an environmental crisis. Rather than an Eden, the suburbs were an environmental calamity (Benton-Short and Short, 2013).

There were also the feminist critiques that suburbs became a way to discipline and contain women after their participation in the workplace during World War II. *Suburbia* hardened traditional gender roles after the plasticity of the war years. *Suburbia* was a place where women raised children and looked after the home, a domestic prison camp that maintained male hegemony (Friedan, 1963).

*Suburbia* was the vehicle for wider social criticisms. It was not so much a causal analysis but an equivalence that read “contemporary” or “now” from *Suburbia*. Both the supporters and critics were responding to the myth. And remember that a myth is an intellectual construction that embodies beliefs and values as much as information and facts. The real question is not whether a myth is true or not but whose truth it is (Short, 1991).

### Surburbia goes global

*Suburbia* was specific to the post-war United States, but the myth was so compelling, and spread so widely, that its physical form was widely copied. Shorn of its historical and geographic specificity, the built form of *Suburbia* came to suggest global modernity and newfound affluence; it became a symbol of progress and an embodiment of contemporary success. It was copied in various forms around the world as developers employed the myth to meet the demand for elites and wannabe-elites. A new version of a more exclusive *Suburbia* took hold in foreign lands. Tracts of single-family homes sprouted in the cities of the Global South and in the former Soviet Empire. Often set in gated communities, these new suburbs embodied modernity and affluence and global connectivity. It was no longer a phenomenon limited to the United States; it became a physical-cultural form to house the established and rising elites.

### From *Suburbia* to *suburbia*

The myth has also dominated commentary on the suburban experience beyond the time and place of *Suburbia*. It is as if the experience of the post-war United States, despite all its particularities and specificities, became the template for future understandings. *Suburbia*, an American myth, became a global yardstick to measure and explain suburban experiences and understand metropolitan dynamics around the world.

*Suburbia* has passed into legend. We now live in a global suburbia of greater heterogeneity and difference. Rather than a place of Being, it is still in the process of Becoming. So let us look in detail at some of the processes behind this global suburbia and note their differences from *Suburbia*.

Let us begin with movement. The journey to *Suburbia* became a classic foundational myth of the United States, a mythic quest, the search for an Eden that was equal in power and sweep to the mythic move west beyond the frontier. In global suburbia, in contrast, banishment and displacement, the removal from Eden, is just as important as the search for Eden.

### Banishment

Whereas *Suburbia* was a desired destination, suburbia is as much a place of banishment. Post-war public housing projects in countries such as Scotland and France were built on the periphery of the major cities. In Edinburgh and Paris, for example, while the rich lived in the central core, it

was the poor that lived on the city's edge. Today, there is marked revalorization of selected central cities around the world. In this urban resurgence, the suburban edge now contains the banished and the displaced (Short, 2017).

The breakneck urbanization of China, for example, has involved displacement on a massive scale. In Shanghai between 1992 and 1999, more than one million people were evicted under municipal plans to clear away older housing in the central city areas. At least 1.5 million people in Beijing were displaced for the 2008 Summer Olympics, and this figure does not include the impact on rural migrants to the city. While many improved their housing conditions, compensation levels were low and often involved the destruction of tight-knit communities and relocation to distant areas of the city. In Shanghai, the Xintiandi project consisted of 52 hectares, with 23 residential blocks housing 70,000 people. The poor were displaced to make way for upmarket expensive housing. Many were forced to move to the outer suburban areas, far from family and work opportunities (He and Wu, 2005).

Displacement is also a feature of cities with large or substantial populations whose semi- and illegal occupancy of prime sites provides an opportunity for the state and capital to displace them, often without the need for compensation. In India during the 2000s, private capital investment and state mega-projects led to massive evictions. Communities living alongside the strategically located River Yamuna were especially targeted. People who had migrated from the rural areas of Bihar, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh established these communities over 30 years ago, but hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2010 provided the opportunity for an urban makeover that made 200,000 people homeless.

The displaced people of Delhi were pushed out to settlements on the city's edge. Bhalswa Colony was established in 1999 with more than 30,000 people from eight different sites in Delhi, but the mixing delayed a unified community response. The people in Bhalswa are housed in 21 acres beside one of the city's three main landfill sites, a rubbish dump 22 meters high with 2,200 tons added each day. It is on low-lying land subject to regular flooding. It is a bleak place, windswept, and frequently fire-swept. Contaminated water from the landfill regularly floods people's homes. Almost 80 percent of residents suffer from stomach problems. Chronic diarrhea and vomiting are common ailments. The area suffers from poor sanitation and unclean drinking water, situations exacerbated by high densities. Most live in poverty. Half of the children are malnourished (Bhan, 2009).

The resettlement is 30 kilometers from Delhi, a half-hour bus ride from the end of the metro system. The people are far from the old social networks that provided jobs and access to public services. Many people scavenge the landfill looking to recycle rags, plastics, glass, and copper wires. Women are often employed as domestic servants, and in addition to their difficult working conditions and long commutes, they are often subject to exploitation and abuse.

Since 2000, large-scale investment projects in Manila in the Philippines revalorized the informal housing areas. The informal settlers were forced out of the central areas. The old political link between government and settlers was replaced by the growing link between the government and private developers. Private capital, with help from the World Bank and the Asian Development Agency, promoted a modernization ensemble of railway and highway construction, mixed-use developments, and condo buildings. One project, the North-South Rail Modernization Project, runs through metro Manila, cost \$120 million, and involved the demolition of slums and the relocation of 90,000 households. The clearance frontier moved out from the railway line to adjacent informal settlements and businesses as authorities secured the purity of the cleared site. In 2010, rents in surrounding areas increased from 1,000 pesos for one room to 2,500 pesos. Across the city there was a "a pernicious urban warfare against urban settlers" as the informal residents were "displaced, deconcentrated, and relocated to distant socialized housing projects" (Ortega, 2016).

When revalorization of central cities occurs, as in the case of Delhi or Manila, the poor are displaced to the suburbs.

## Market displacement

If banishment is an overtly political process, then displacement is its economic equivalent.

Let us look at San Francisco, a high-density city covering 6 square miles. During the past 10 years, there has been something of a digital gold rush as high-tech, computer app companies grow and flourish. The city is like a hot house that provides the conditions for super growth of certain plants, in this case computer behemoths and start-ups. While Silicon Valley, down the interstate in Palo Alto, was the home of the early industry, its current heart is in San Francisco. The creative young labor, the sector's basic raw material, prefers the city to sunny but essentially boring Palo Alto. There is also a division between the "older" (in Silicon Valley historical terms) companies established in Silicon Valley such as Apple, Cisco, Google, and Facebook and the new start-ups that tend to cluster in the city. In recent years, even the large companies have shifted operations to San Francisco. Almost 50,000 new jobs were created in the city in the last decade, most of them very high-paying relative to the average U.S. worker or household. The growing wealth gap in the United States plays out in the housing market of San Francisco.

Tight urban space and rising demand has led to escalating housing prices and rents. Million-dollar homes, rare in the city before 2012, are now much more common. A 1,400 square foot apartment rents for \$10,000 a month. The median monthly rent is \$4,225. Lower income groups in the rental sector are pushed out to marginal areas of the city such as Hunter's Point. Some houses are purchased only to be knocked down to make room for newer, more expensive housing. There are also the evictions. Under California's Ellis Act, landlords can evict tenants "to go out of business," which in practice means that landowners can evict all of a property's tenants, in effect going out of business, and then turn the property into expensive units. In Los Angeles, a city ordinance requires rent control for five years after the change, but in San Francisco, it only requires that tenants receive just under \$6,000 per person in compensation for the eviction. Since 2009, more than a hundred properties each year have used the Ellis Act to evict tenants; more than 150 people are evicted each month. This is not an organized, state-run project of displacement but rather a market-driven response to housing demand in a permissive regulatory environment.

## New social formations

*Suburbia* was based on a specific social formation. The post-war United States was experiencing a demographic dividend and the growth of a new middle-class. It was the baby boomer era of growing families.

In global suburbia, in contrast, there are a variety of positions on the demographic transition, from the rapid population growth of sub-Saharan countries to the maturing demographic dividend of Brazil, India, and China to the later stages of limited population growth in North America and Europe. In countries at the earlier stages of the demographic transition, rapid population growth is reflected by the growth of informal settlements, both in the central city and the suburbs. In countries of the demographic dividend, sometimes a new middle class is reflected in classic suburbia but more often, smaller family size precludes the need for large family dwellings. High-rise housing remains popular.

Consider the case of the United States. The great suburban boom from 1950 to 1970 was based on an expanded demographic base of large families. In 1947, the average household contained

3.5 people. By 2016, this had decreased to approximately 2.5, part of the global demographic transition to lower birth and death rates. The larger suburban houses are now less attractive for smaller families, especially if they also require costly maintenance and commuting. Smaller family size encourages reevaluating urban housing markets, placing the emphasis on maximizing accessibility more than space.

There is an increase in single person and non-child households, so the move to suburbia is less driven by family dynamics. If anything, there is a shift to the higher density cities, as the more affluent single person and non-child person households seek to maximize employment and recreational opportunities.

Then there is the revalorization of time. We have to do more in less time in part because of our technology's punishing immediacy. In *Suburbia*, time was in greater abundance and so longer journeys to work were more acceptable. People relied on snail mail and interactions took place over days and weeks rather than seconds and minutes. Today, time is more valuable, and so longer journeys to work are imposed on the poor rather than embraced by the rich. The pressure on time revalorizes central city locations and devalorizes more distant places. If suburban living involves marked separation between work and home, it slides down the income scale.

### New physical forms

The metropolitan regions of the world are complex mosaics. Even in the United States the old binary of Suburbs and Inner-City, with its superimposed racial and income differences, is being undercut and replaced by a new metropolitan reality containing suburban poverty as well as suburban exclusivity, and central cities of resurgence and gentrification as well as stubborn and enduring pockets of poverty (Hanlon et al., 2010).

This new suburbia of the global metropolitan has a number of characteristics that distinguish it from *Suburbia*. First, suburbia is no longer dominated by single-family homes at low densities. The variety of housing ranges from gated communities to informal settlements and villages now swallowed up by metropolitan expansion. High-rise apartment dwellings across the world look out on the peri-urban fringe.

Second, suburbia contains a variety of income, racial, and ethnic groups. *Suburbia* was white and middle class; suburbia houses a richer variety of different social demographics.

Third, the division between work and home, which was such an essential feature of *Suburbia*, no longer holds. Jobs and economic activities are more widely diffused. In some cases, the spread is due to market forces, industries, and offices moving to cheaper areas, and in others it is aided by the government. Economic activities in the central city are at times displaced to the city's edge. At the edge of Seoul, Paju Book City houses 250 publishers and almost 10,000 workers. The Korean government and publishers supported the site, eager to create a creative cluster. It opened in 2001 as publishers relocated from central Seoul.

In global suburbia, there are more complex economies than a simple binary between home and suburbs on the one hand, and city and work on the other. New, more complex metropolitan economies are emerging. The domestic sites of suburbia are also places of economic activity as people work from home, establish commercial enterprises, and turn the purely domestic into the domestic economy.

In *Suburbia*, the main travel pattern was from home to work and back again. In global suburbia, there are convoluted circulations, as the journey to work, shop, and recreate takes on patterns more similar to Brownian motion, with movement in many different directions. Main roads and major public transport routes still guide developments but there is a wide dispersal of jobs, homes, stores, and recreational opportunities. Two standard models of urban studies, the Burgess

and Hoyt models, assumed a mononuclear city with patterns and processes circulating around a strong, organizing center. Perhaps we need to look again at another classic model, the Harris-Ullman model, for an alternative with more contemporary relevance. In 1945, Chauncy Harris and Edward Ullman (1945) proposed a multiple nuclei model in which there were multiple centers in a metropolitan economy. Organizing growth points were distributed throughout the metropolitan regions. Their model is closer to today's reality than the more venerated Burgess and Hoyt models, which are staples of urban studies. Perhaps, however, the Harris-Ullman needs a fuller airing.

## The end of suburbia

As metropolitan expansion increases, the division between city and suburb, while it may have legal and government reality, becomes more blurred. Can we legitimately speak then of suburbs as something different from the rest of the metro region? I think only in the very broadest terms. The metropolitan region still contains concentrated areas of centrality at one extreme and peripheral zones at the other. But the rest, the vast middle, is so amorphous, so variegated, and now so large, that it is now difficult to speak of them in the singularity of suburbia. The metropolitan areas are now one giant suburbia topped and tailed by extreme concentration at one end, and a half-urban, half-rural liminal zone at the other.

This suburbia of the vast middle is so complex and heterogeneous that the term has lost real meaning other than the broadest of categories. We need then to identify different types of metropolitan districts. These include the gated communities and informal settlements, the rich escaping the city, and the poor banished and displaced from the city.

Sometimes the two intermingle. The rise of the new middle class is part of an overall economic transformation that also involves marked and growing inequality. In China, for example, the inequality is also overlain by citizenship status, as poor rural migrants are restricted to the city's periphery and edged out of the formal state's services. Increased securitization is in part a response to the rising inequality, but it is also a marker of status, an entrenched requirement of more affluent consumers. Uniformed guards and checkpoints fit the growing list of required attributes that also includes marble top counters and metallic-sheened durables.

*Suburbia* the myth referred to a specific time and place. Global suburbia is now the huge liminal space between central cities and urban fringes. Its coverage is so large that it is perhaps time that we drop the term. Its usage always contains, in some measure, the myth of a *Suburbia* now rendered obsolete by the pace, scale, and sheer variety of metropolitan emergences. It should come as no surprise to readers of this book's previous chapters that perhaps it is time to abandon the term for the sake of clarity and sharper intellectual focus. To use the terms "suburb" and "suburbia" is to invoke, sometimes directly, often implicitly, the myth of *Suburbia* even as the myth fades from view. And even if we separate out suburbia from the mythic elements of *Suburbia*, the term now enfolds such a huge and diverse metropolitan landscape that its usage is limited. It is the end of the suburbs as a phenomenon and suburbia as a useful discursive device. Our task is now to build more sophisticated models and understandings of a complex metropolis without the crutch of these increasingly obsolete terms.

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