

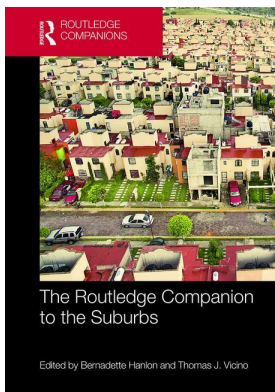
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## The Routledge Companion to the Suburbs

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### Suburban stereotypes

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# Suburban stereotypes

*Richard Harris*

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## Introduction

Stereotypes have a bad reputation. This is not surprising because, whether of people or places, most have undesirable connotations: think of “slum,” “ghetto,” or, for Parisians, *les banlieues*. But some are positive. “Neighborhood,” for example, evokes warm feelings of community. And then there are names that carry mixed messages. “Suburb” is one: praised by some, damned by others. Indeed, the very same aspects of suburbs may be viewed positively or negatively. As if this were not complicated enough, in some parts of the world, the places that North Americans would call suburbs have no identity and are associated with no stereotype. And so the first, and major, section of this survey explores the diversity, and occasional absence, of suburban stereotypes.

Even positive stereotypes are criticized when they oversimplify and mislead. For example, many neighborhoods in fact lack community. But we should be careful not to criticize a stereotype just for being inaccurate. After all, definitions are no better. There are few places that conform in all respects to the usual American definition of a suburb – residential, low-density, peripheral location, and with a separate political identity – and yet we commonly refer to all sorts of other places as suburbs. It is convenient to do so. The same with stereotypes: they can be damaging, but they can also be useful. Take “the suburban way of life.” In North America this phrase implies a lifestyle that is car-dependent and focused on home-owning families. It connotes a focus on everyday domesticity that is welcome to some, anathema to others, but either way stereotyped. Of course, many suburbs and their residents do not fit this template, but some slip-page is surely acceptable. After all, it is a convenient way of speaking about a type of experience. And so we might think of “suburban way of life” as a *useful* stereotype. Objections begin when the connotations deviate greatly from reality, when *many* residents are renters who are not living in nuclear families, raising children, or driving cars. At what point do we decide that a line has been crossed between a stereotype that is serviceable and one that is misleading? There is no easy answer, an issue that is discussed in the second major section.

If stereotypes are often inaccurate, why are they so common? The answer differs depending on the stereotype in question and who believes it. The general answer is that they help us make sense of our world, expressing the aspirations of people at particular times, including their desire to set themselves apart. They have been articulated and reproduced in various ways: by the media, and

by private agents, including land developers, whose purposes they serve. Even when a stereotype serves no purpose, or is indeed counterproductive, it may persist through sheer inertia. The third and final major section of this survey considers these elements in the life of stereotypes, while a concluding comment offers advice about how we should use them.

## The diversity of suburban stereotypes

You probably have some idea in your mind of what suburbs are. You may assume that this is *the* suburban stereotype, the image that everyone else possesses, and many probably do. But others – depending on where they live, how they make a living, and what media they consume – will see things differently. At any time, there may be a dominant stereotype but these vary historically and geographically, while some places have none at all.

### *Positive stereotypes*

The word “suburb” was born in late eighteenth century England where it soon captured people’s imagination. That is not surprising: by 1850, Britain had become the first urban nation, in that a majority of people then lived in cities. This trend involved large-scale suburbanization, a process that continued through the late nineteenth century. Working-class districts in industrial cities were crowded and unhealthy. Those who could escape to the suburbs did so, and reformers extolled the anti-urban virtues of suburban living: a healthier environment that was better for children; more space in and around the home; access to nature, in gardens and parks; a moral, home-centered life, distant from the corrupting influences of the city (Clapson, 2003, pp. 51–78). The purest version was called “the garden suburb” (Whitehand and Carr, 1999). It was an appealing vision, a suburban ideal.

Many elements of this stereotype persisted and were transmuted as they became influential elsewhere in Anglo-America: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. These countries inherited anti-urbanism, with its valuation of space, nature, and domesticity (Bunce, 1994). To these, locals added white-settler virtues of home ownership, which after 1945 were seen as part of the American (and Canadian, and Australian) dream (Archer, 2005, pp. 250–289; Jackson, 1986, pp. 68–72). Owning one’s home was above all the hope of immigrants and workers, and many were able to realize that aspiration, if necessary by building their own. It is therefore ironic that by the 1950s homeownership had come to be seen as a typically middle-class achievement. In the United States, with its history of slavery, the suburban connotations of exclusivity were as much racial as economic, these being ensured by having a separate political identity (Jackson, 1986). The American suburban stereotype, then, became more specific: white, middle-class, owner-occupied single-family homes, and self-governed.

As suburbanization continued, a more particular, related stereotype emerged and acquired its own name: exurbia. Persistent anti-urbanism and widespread car ownership enabled some people to move to largely rural settings and still commute (Bunce, 1994, pp. 89–101). An early dramatization of this ideal was the book and then movie *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House* (1948). The image was one of living close to nature, perhaps growing produce, keeping horses, and enjoying rural leisure pursuits such as golf. Over time, it acquired connotations of a commitment to the conservation of the countryside. Exurbia, then, became a landscape and lifestyle ideal that was distinct from that of the more urbanized suburbanite, and in some ways opposed to it (Cadieux and Taylor, 2013; Sandberg et al., 2013).

These positive images of suburbs and exurbs reflected the desires and experience of those who moved out of the city. But there is a different experience and vision of these places, which

embodies the aspirations of those who have traveled in the opposite direction. It is a stereotype that hardly exists now in North America, Europe, or Japan, where rural-urban migration has run its course. But in the rest of the world it is a widespread, and sometimes dominant force.

In Europe and North America, until the mid-twentieth century, millions moved from rural areas to cities. Some were dislocated by famine, evictions, or farm mechanization. Others simply sought jobs and a better life. Most ended up in inner cities, crowded into deteriorated housing but close to nearby work. These people had a simple stereotype of urban life: opportunity!

Since World War II, the scale of urbanization elsewhere has been greater than anything experienced earlier. In the region first affected, Latin America, the initial wave of rural migrants also moved to inner cities where the jobs were (Turner, 1968, pp. 356, 359). Those with more secure work could afford to commute from the urban fringe (Turner, 1968, pp. 357–359). But the numbers of people involved soon made this strategy impossible. Increasingly, rural migrants got no further than the suburbs, where they occupied various types of shelters, ranging from squatter settlements to densely redeveloped villages embraced by urban expansion. This pattern has happened on a massive scale in China (Wu, 2013, pp. 169–170) and India (Dupont, 2004, pp. 176–178), as well as in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In Noida, for example, a planned new town on Delhi's periphery, a survey revealed that most residents were migrants, and that in Noida's slums the proportion reached 99 percent (Dupont, 2004, p. 180).

For some migrants, suburban settlement is temporary. Recently in China, the system of *hukou* residency permits has prevented rural migrants from accessing urban services, including education. For many, then, the urban experience is limited and temporary. For example, on the fringes of Dongguan, a Chinese city of eight million, temporary migrants comprise three-quarters of all residents (Liu, 2007). In parts of southern Africa “circular migration” has developed, whereby workers regularly move between farms and urban homes, mostly located at the urban fringe (Ferguson, 1999; Potts, 2010). More generally, in large parts of the world today, the typical resident of the urban periphery has sought the city, not fled it.

The aspiration of these migrants is clear enough. As Dupont (2004, pp. 181, 185) observed, “Delhi's squatter settlements shelter mostly migrant households attracted by the employment opportunities provided by the city” while their presence in suburban Noida testifies to “the power of attraction of the new industrial center.” Migrants often hope to provide their children with better economic and social prospects. There is also a complex gendered dimension. Almost everywhere, employment and educational opportunities for women are better in urban than in rural areas, while attitudes are more progressive there with respects to women's rights. But sometimes only the men move, and commonly the decision to migrate is made by the husband alone and not always with his partner's interests in mind (Haider, 2000).

Beyond plausible speculations about “opportunity,” we know little about the nature of the stereotype that rural migrants have of cities or of their fringes: the research has not been done. We do know that, once a pattern starts, migrants are influenced by the experience of friends and kin who have already moved: based on reports and connections, they follow those who went before. This was true of the Irish who moved to Manchester, England, in the nineteenth century, or to American cities in the early twentieth; it was as true of Italians who moved to Toronto after 1945 as it is of Indian and Chinese villagers who now look for work in Mumbai or Shenzhen. Because most migrant destinations are now located at the urban fringe, the stereotype that millions of migrants must have is in that sense “suburban.” Whether it is seen as an end in itself, or as a stepping-stone to a more purely urbanized ideal, is an open question.

As many nations in the Global South have prospered, more of their peoples have migrated to the urban fringe in the modern Western way: they have moved from the city. Everywhere, but above all in China, a class of people has emerged who aspire to own property at the urban

fringe. Often the dwellings are in medium- or high-rises rather than ground-oriented single-family structures, but their aspirations are recognizably similar to those of their North American counterparts. In India, the aim is “to distance oneself from the city, to be at ease, away from the chaos of the streets” (Brosius, 2010, p. 94). To accomplish that, for example in a gated development, is a mark of prestige (Waldrop, 2008). Status is also a key element in the attraction of similar developments in China (Fleischer, 2010). Here, in the past, many used to “prefer a bed in the central city to a house in the suburbs,” but recent years have seen the emergence of “suburban living ideals” (Zhou and Logan, 2008, p. 157; Shen and Wu, 2013, p. 1823). Significantly, in both countries, the names given to many developments echo Western ideals: “Victoria Gardens,” “Gulmohar Greens,” and “Rose Garden Villas” (Brosius, 2010; Wu, 2013, p. 169). Elsewhere – in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and South Africa, as in the United States – security is also a prominent motive in the growth of gated communities (Caldeira, 1996; Dick and Rimmer, 1998, p. 2317; Herzog, 2015). These places offer variants of a common vision: some include security, some feature lower-density and greenery, but all imply a removal from urban problems, control over living space, and an address that speaks of achievement, if not prestige. They are locally appropriate modifications of the Anglo-American suburban ideal.

### *Negative stereotypes*

These positive stereotypes have had their negative counterpoints. That is obviously true of migrant shantytowns, but it has been no less true of middle-class suburbia, wherever it has developed. And the criticisms have been present almost from the beginning.

Among nineteenth-century cities, London’s suburbs were by far the most extensive. They were lampooned for their supposed social and physical mediocrity. As one historian puts it, the “end product was generally viewed with distaste, ridicule or contempt” (Thompson, 1982, p. 3). Part of the reason was that “the suburbs appeared monotonous, featureless, without character . . . infinitely boring to behold.” Another part was social: the “wastelands of housing [were seen as] settings for dreary, petty lives without social, cultural or intellectual interests, settings which fostered a pre-emptive preoccupation with outward appearances.” In a phrase, suburbs were seen as bastions of mediocrity.

Just as the positive stereotype evolved when it was exported, so did the negative. Across the English Channel, by the 1920s the lower middle-class *pavillonnaires* who moved into the Parisian suburbs were being damned for their small-minded parochiality (Harris and Vorms, 2017, p. 8). Versions of this stereotype persist for current settlement in the *zone périurbain* in the outer fringe. Across the Atlantic, in the 1920s and then more prominently during the post-war suburban boom, critics built on the theme of conformity (Archer, 2005, pp. 283–285, 331–340; Nicolaidis, 2006, pp. 81, 91). Grids were replaced by a landscape of loops and lollipop shapes that was no more visually stimulating. With rising prosperity, home, and car ownership, the new conformity was one of mass consumerism: a car in every driveway, a fridge in every kitchen, and a TV in every living room on which everyone watched *I Love Lucy* at the same time every week. This could be seen as an achievement, but also as an enforceable norm. Suburbanites – a new term – were stereotyped as status-conscious joiners, eager to fit in, to match or even outdo their neighbors, but only in minor, acceptable ways. A new, gendered critique emerged (Clapson, 2003, pp. 125–141). Women were seen to bear the brunt of everyday social pressures, notably those of food preparation, childrearing, and home decoration, while being confined to home and neighborhood. Part of the social stereotype, then, was the neurosis that conformity created. Accordingly, suburban life was typed as comfortable but bland, and unhappy because it was devoid of larger meaning.

In recent decades, the package of criticism has changed and seen some significant additions. The charge of social conformity and homogeneity, and the image of suburbs as “a cultural void or desert” have persisted, and can still be found in the entertainment media, but are eroding (Huq, 2013, p. 6). The feminist critique of women’s isolation has widened as commentators have pointed out that children and the elderly are often the most disadvantaged by car dependency (Clapson, 2003, pp. 125–141). And new lines of argument have been developed (Bruegmann, 2005; Rome, 2001). Suburbs have been represented as irresponsible. Because they are unfriendly to pedestrians and cyclists, they are seen to have played a part in the rise of obesity, with negative effects on public health. In economic terms, because of their lower densities, they are costly to service. As generous consumers of carbon energy, steel, cement, wood, brick earth, and tarmac, they are damned for destroying farmland and wetlands as well as water and air quality, while contributing more than their share to global warming. The modern negative stereotype of suburbia, then, extends beyond its effects on residents to include the public at large, nationally and globally. Lumped under the label “sprawl,” a purely negative term, suburbs are now seen by some as the epitome of how humanity is sending itself to hell in a hand basket.

To some extent the positive and negative stereotypes of Anglo-American suburbs emphasize different things. The environmental critique, for example, has no positive side. But on other points the contrasting pictures involve a different take on the same features (Davison, 2013, p. 10). What, to one observer, appears as social conformity, land hungry sprawl, consumerism, and a lack of culture, may appear to another as responsible citizenship, spaciousness, a decent standard of living, and a healthy emphasis on home and family. Above all, then, the difference is one of point of view.

The same is true for suburban migrant settlements and shack towns. Their promise is one of striving and opportunity, but living conditions are often appalling. As a result, squatter settlements have been condemned and stereotyped as unhealthy firetraps, crime-ridden havens of immorality, fit only for demolition. That is why policies of slum clearance, begun in the Global North in the late nineteenth century, came to be used widely, everywhere, in the twentieth. Even those who are disinclined to blame their residents for the appalling conditions have used slums and squatter settlements as a symbol of failure – of governments, or of the whole global economic system (e.g., Davis, 2006).

Point of view also accounts for the divergence of opinion about the middle-class suburban developments that have become common in the Global South since the 1980s. Given that these developments are situated in countries that have struggled to reduce poverty and to acquire the trappings of Western affluence, criticism of urban fringe developments has been somewhat muted. Even so, they have been subject to negative stereotyping. In China, for example, the critique of sprawl has given birth to a new term, *tan da bing* (making a big pancake) (Fleischer, 2010). The standard charge of suburban blandness has been extended by claiming that suburban developments merely ape North American originals – in their naming, design, and often their auto-dependence (Herzog, 2015). They therefore appear marginal, makers of U.S.-led urbanization. It might seem that no type of suburb has escaped a negative stereotype.

But what about those places whose urban fringes lack a generic name, whether that be “suburb,” “exurb,” “shack town,” *banlieue*, or some Chinese, Hindi, Persian, or Spanish equivalent? This is not an academic question, for there are many such places. People in Teheran and Cairo, for example, have no single name for what North Americans call “suburbs” (Harris and Vorms, 2017). The same is true in India, even though it was long subject to colonial rule. The British introduced the word “suburb” in the nineteenth century, and used it for over a century; after winning independence in 1947, India made English one of its official languages. But only in Mumbai is “suburb” now used in a generic sense, and it has no equivalent in any indigenous

language (Harris, 2017). In China, there are generic words, but they differ according to the speaker: urban experts talk of *jiaoku* and local residents of *nong cun* (“rural,” “village”) or *jinjiao nong cun* (“close-in villages”); in Germany, experts use terms such as *suburbanisierung* and *unland-gemeinde* while residents prefer *stadtrand* (Harris and Vorms, 2017). In yet other countries, the words come from different languages. In Zambia, Anglophone planners use “peri-urban” to refer to the outer urban fringe but local Swahili-speakers talk of *kiungu* (“the thing attached”). What does exist in some places are names for different *types* of suburbs, whether affluent and gated or poor and ramshackle. In these varied situations, there is no agreed-upon word for what most English speakers call suburbs. Without such a word, we are not likely to find a single stereotype, and perhaps not even several. The concept of a suburban stereotype simply does not apply.

## Cold reality

Stereotypes can be useful, but there are many situations where they are employed but should not be. They can arise when people are speaking about the present, but they are even more common when referring to the past.

Hardly any suburb has ever been as desirable as the ideal that prevailed in its day, or as dire as critics claimed. The post-war suburb is a case in point. Because they were new, no suburb was as verdant as it was supposed to be, its neighbors as friendly, its location as convenient. Many were not white and middle-class, or had apartments as well as single-family homes, or failed to conform to any elements of the stereotype except for being new and peripheral. Collectively, Toronto’s suburbs are a good example (Harris, 2015). Conversely, even those places that consisted of white, middle-class homeowners were never as bland and homogeneous as their critics supposed. There were men in blue-collar as well as white-collar occupations; some wives worked outside the home for pay; family interests and childrearing practices varied. The residents were, after all, people.

Often, where two opposing stereotypes exist, the truth lies in between. There are always grains of truth: most of the residents of 1950s suburbs were indeed able to own their own homes, raised families, and were rather narrow and conformist in their tastes; the shack towns of Delhi or Lagos are indeed poor places to live but most of their residents are better off than where they came from and many succeed in making meaningful lives; those nearby in gated communities may aspire to Western-style consumerism but will also draw on local values and traditions. And so for those who wish to know where the truth lies, a useful first step is to consider both, or all, of the applicable stereotypes. Collectively, these are likely to point to important features of the place in question.

Exceptions occur when a stereotype is so compelling that it endures beyond its expiration date. This applies to the Anglo-American ideal. The author of a survey of popular culture concluded that representations of suburban, white, affluent, male-headed nuclear families have persisted long after the world has changed, and that these have contributed to the misleading persistence of a mythic image; she also notes that the times are now changing (Huq, 2013, p. 194). More fundamentally, an argument can be made that the very idea of a suburb – simplified very simply as a residential space at the urban fringe – is no longer valid. Fringe areas have always contained a mix of land uses, including workplaces, shops, and roads, but for decades it was reasonable to assume that the people who lived in the suburbs worked in the city. That is no longer true. In most metropolitan areas, there are more jobs in the suburbs than downtown, these being clustered in nodes of varying size. Residents of suburbs may not define themselves or their places of residence in relation to the city center, or think of themselves as suburban (Shanks et al., 2017). In that sense, “suburban” models of any sort have become irrelevant.

At least, when applied to the present, a stereotype can easily be contradicted by looking at census statistics or going for a ride. When used to make sense of the past, however, inaccuracies can easily persist or grow, not least because, in some measure, they always express our own concerns. Part of today's image of the 1950s suburb – good and bad – reflect our current concerns and views: feminists see domestic patriarchy beyond anything that contemporaries perceived; environmentalists highlight effects of sprawl that were overlooked at the time; nostalgic conservatives praise the nuclear families that once were taken for granted. These tweaks to existing stereotypes are not necessarily any more accurate than the originals, and may be less so. Qualifying them, however, requires the sorts of research that few have the desire, or the resources, to undertake.

### How stereotypes arise and persist

So if stereotypes are often inaccurate, and become more so over time, why do they persist? To answer this question, we first have to consider how they arise in the first place. Here there is a fundamental difference in the *raison d'être* of the positive and the negative versions.

Positive stereotypes embody people's aspirations. These may be modest indeed, as with those rural migrants who make their way to the city. They want to be able to eat, to put a roof over their head, and just possibly get ahead. They may not care whether they end up in inner or outer parts of the urban area as long as they can fulfill Maslow's basic needs. Those moving out of the city are better off and aim to satisfy higher needs: comfort, security, and privacy. Since those are more clearly associated with the suburbs, theirs is a more specifically suburban vision. Either way, the stereotype articulates an ideal, a vision, a goal.

This ideal is most forcefully articulated by those who gain from promoting it. These include the agents of land development: developers, builders, lenders, and the professions that serve them, including lawyers and real estate agents. Developers are central, and their advertising – originally in newspapers and on billboards, now more commonly online – is the clearest articulation of the stereotypical ideal, and of its local variations. Brosius (2010) provides examples for Delhi. It is their business to be in tune with local needs while, for marketing purposes, it is in their interests to oversimplify, for example by “extend[ing] the tone of the garden suburb to that of suburbia at large” (Bunce, 1994, p. 168). In other words, their task is to market a stereotype.

The same line of argument does not help explain negative stereotypes. Those who dislike suburbs need not live there, and hardly anyone stands to profit from damning them. But there are rewards other than monetary. Historically, condemnations of the suburbs have been class-based, coming from those who looked down on those whose aspirations were limited to ownership of a comfortable home. Critics were either self-styled, urbane intellectuals whose milieu was the city, or the owners of landed estates beyond city limits (Bruegmann, 2005, pp. 118–119; Thompson, 1982, pp. 2–4). Their modern equivalents are those “university-educated professionals,” including journalists and academics, who are actual or potential gentrifiers, as well as prosperous exurbanites who bought extensive acreages in more rural settings (Davison, 2013, p. 15). Both the urbanites and, paradoxically, the exurbanites often have a “self-righteous and condescending” attitude toward the intervening suburbs, dismissing them as featureless sprawl (Davison, 2013, p. 15; Sandberg et al., 2013, p. 19). Negative stereotyping, then, can be a form of one-upmanship.

That is still true, but there are now objective grounds for critique. As the scale of suburbanization has increased, the loss of farmland has become a more serious issue. So has the impact on wildlife and local watersheds, while there is wide agreement that sprawl contributes to global



warming. Everyone now has a stake in limiting suburban growth, and raising the density of that which has already occurred. To be effective, however, those who invoke modern, negative stereotypes would be advised to lose the self-righteousness and condescension. That is not the way to win friends and influence people.

Both the negative and, to a lesser extent the positive, stereotypes have persisted because of the influence of the media. Popular forms of entertainment have often invoked and reinforced negative images of the suburbs (Huq, 2013). The same appears to be true of local newspapers (Harris and Hendershott, 2018). This matters because many of those who criticize the suburbs, and those who live there, do not actually know what they are talking about. Nicolaides (2006, p. 90) has noted of Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs – two of the most influential urbanists of the past century, and both critics of suburbia – that “neither actually observed the suburbs firsthand.” Ignorance, above all, is the basis on which stereotypes thrive.

## Conclusion

We must handle stereotypes with care, but we cannot do without them. A recent study found that post-war Toronto has not fit several of the clichéd descriptions discussed previously: a significant minority of its residents never bought into the suburban dream; its suburbs have always been socially diverse; and, perhaps most surprisingly, a number of local, educated professionals have always defended them (Harris, 2015). But, at the same time, those stereotypes do provide a point of departure for understanding the city. They are a scaffolding, eventually to be discarded, without which it would be difficult to construct a coherent account. And what is true for Toronto is surely true for anywhere.

But if we cannot do without them, we should also handle with care. For every positive version, there is a negative and, because the truth often lies in between, we should always consider both. We should pay attention to who is articulating each one, and consider what their stake in the matter might be, whether financial, social, or perhaps even psychological. We should be wary of stereotypes that have been around for a long-time because their relevance may have eroded, and we should be even more skeptical of those of the past, for they may in fact say much more about the present. And we should be alert to the possibility that, in any particular setting, no stereotype might exist, not even the idea of the suburb itself.

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