**Living on the edge: building vulnerable suburbs on the edge of the South-East of England**

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For much of the period since 1945 (and in accelerated form after 1979, in England at least), it has been taken for granted that home ownership has been the route to security – delivering invulnerability (or at least reducing vulnerability) through bricks and mortar. The suburbs have been invented as places of safety away from the threats and challenges of the (cosmopolitan) city, as protected spaces of family houses, gardens and steadily rising property values. Urbanists have struggled to engage with the suburbs over many years - for Gans (in 1968) the point was already (counter to Wirth) to argue that suburbanism was a way of life; for others, like Jacobs and her contemporary followers suburbs were simply a means of avoiding the intensity of city life (see also Pile).

But what happens when the taken for granted assumptions are undermined and the search for security becomes more intense and uncertain? What happens when the role of the suburbs shifts, so that they are no longer a response to urbanisation, but a defining aspect of urbanism? Think about this with the help of an ESRC funded research project focused on sustainable housing growth in Milton Keynes and Northamptonshire (ES/I038632/1).

Traditionally suburbia has been conceptualised through the prism of the central city, as a process of succession has moved residents outwards, commuting back in for employment, but living in the suburbs as a relative haven of security and space, free from the tensions (and maybe also the excitements) of the city. In this context, the suburbs have often been understood as bland, non-places, defined by what they are not as much as by what they are, with the dynamism of urban life somehow bleached out of them.

But in recent years, these understandings have been challenged from three main sources: the first draws on the experience of Los Angeles to present an alternative to the Chicago School, suggesting that it is now the supposed peripheries that drive urban change, rather than the older urban cores (Dear 2000, 2002); the second reflects on the experience of parts of the global South, where new urban developments often owe little to the older urban cores, and what may look like suburbs are better understood as quite distinctive spaces of urban living (Simone 2004); a third draws attention to the *Zwischenstadt* (or ‘in between city’), those spaces of the city that cannot easily be characterised in the spatial language of concentric rings (Sieverts 2003).

The South East is England’s quintessential suburban region. Popular representations of life in England’s ‘home counties’ well into the 1960s reflect this clearly - men in pin stripe suits and bowlers travelling up to the city or Whitehall to work, while women remain at home managing domestic space. The politics of the region were powerfully explored in the *Containment of Urban England* by Peter Hall and others (Hall et al 1973) and nowhere was the politics of this more explicit than in South Buckinghamshire, where a combination of planning controls and the positive commitment to shift any development north to a new town in Milton Keynes protected its green spaces against the pressures of Heathrow, the M4 and encroachments of Slough (Charlesworth and Cochrane 1994).

More recently, however, the South East of England (or the Greater South East) has been described by Peter Hall, Kathy Pain and Nick Green(2006) as a global ‘polycentric metropolis’ or ‘polycentric mega-region’ – a polycentric urban system (comparable to others across Europe). This increasingly identifiable space is one whose central focus is London, even if it incorporates several other centres. As Ian Gordon, Tony Travers and Christine Whitehead argue, ‘the effective London economy extends well beyond the borders of Greater London, encompassing most of South Eastern England and perhaps some areas beyond, in what is for many purposes a single labour market’ (Gordon et al 2004, p. 30). From this perspective (see also Allen et al 1998) London’s reach can be seen to spread out more or less organically, gradually and inexorably incorporating and reshaping more and more of the country. In other words, despite its vast geographical spread (incorporating around half of England’, this is effectively a London city region.

The population is changing too - the 2011 Census confirms ethnic diversity as the norm, rather than the exception. In Milton Keynes, for example, the proportion of the population identifying as ‘black African’ is now significantly higher than the English average and the proportion of school pupils who have black and minority ethnic backgrounds is close to thirty per cent (Kesten et al 2011. See also Huq 2013 on the contested cultures of English suburbia). These are not the suburbanites of caricature.

Here, we revisit the question of the suburbs and seek to re-imagine them by reflecting on the recent experience of development on the outskirts of the London city region. The outer suburbs are increasingly being reinterpreted in public policy and political discourse both as sources of economic dynamism – capable of generating economic growth – and as places whose purpose is to provide the housing for the labour force required to feed the insatiable demands of the wider economy of the London region. But this also means that a new ‘suburban’ region is being identified – the Greater South East – and being made up not just through the everyday lives of those resident within it, but also through the practices of the (public and private sector) policy professionals in their plans, some of which were realised in built form in housing developments and material infrastructure.

Not so long ago it was taken for granted in public policy (e.g. in the Sustainable Communities Plan published in 2003) that sustainable housing growth could be delivered through a series of new developments extending out from urban settlements across the South East of England. Perceived shortages of housing and spiralling house prices led the new Labour Government to set targets for houses to be built in each English region. Growth Areas were identified in the South East of England, stretching out from London as far as the Midlands.

The sustainable communities plan (ODPM 2003) promised to deliver economic, social and environmental sustainability through a series of carefully targeted nudges to the housing market, working with developers and house builders. The promise brought together jobs, good-quality housing and the prospect of balanced communities. This was a promise both for existing residents (who might feel threatened by the arrival of new development) and for future residents (who would be able to take advantage of the amenities being provided). Sustainability was effectively a promise to the (new) suburbs that they would be protected. Sustainability was a much publicised objective, with the promise to create ‘sustainable communities’ through better urban design (including low carbon buildings), community based planning and improved public transport, and remains a core element of contemporary planning policy.

The suburbs were re-imagined as providing the basis of a market driven utopia, in which major house builders would be freed up to deliver the necessary supply of housing, while the social and material infrastructure (in education and health as much as transport for commuting and logistics) was to delivered through public-private partnerships of various sorts (Cochrane 2010). A neo-liberal belief in the power of the market (and house builders in particular) was combined with active state support through planning and infrastructural development. Rather than being a consequence of growth elsewhere, these suburbs and this suburban region were expected to become the drivers or at least the necessary underpinning of neo-liberal urban growth (see Cochrane et al 2013). But this was a deeply flawed utopia, whose inconsistencies are already becoming all too apparent as spatial and social inequality is reproduced, within and beyond the region.

One of the main criticisms of the policy regime associated with the sustainable communities plan (emerging from communities and local authorities alike) was that growth was ‘housing-led’ not ‘infrastructure-led’ – i.e., that housing came without a guarantee of provision for schools, roads and community facilities or even locally based employment to make growth sustainable (or ‘palatable’ as one senior planning officer put it). In other words, the complaint is consistent with complaints traditionally raised about suburban development, as house-builders create new estates with little thought for the social and other provision that might be take for granted in (some) urban contexts, like those imagined as organic by Jane Jacobs (1961).

From one perspective the newly emergent suburban spaces are part of a wider urban system or suburban region – dependent on relations that stretch far beyond their narrow boundaries. But for many of those who live in them, it is their separation that matters, as protected spaces within which to live and prosper. Opposition to housing growth is localised, varying from place to depending on economic, political and social circumstances. So, a contrast can be drawn between the high level of community opposition in a relatively prosperous area like South Northamptonshire where plans for new housing development in 2005 met with fierce resistance, compared with the response from Daventry and Corby, both towns with ambitions for growth. Meanwhile, in Northampton much of the controversy was about housing growth in rural/suburban parishes just outside the boundaries of the town while In Milton Keynes growth assumed within border.

In 2007/8, a crisis in the housing market was just one expression of the wider financial crisis - not only were plans for new house building put on hold, but in most parts of the country – outside London - house prices fell. For the first time in a generation the proportion of the population living in private rented accommodation rose. The harsh realities of economic recession made it impossible for the (not so beautiful) dream to be realised along the hoped for lines and the drive to making up new communities slowed, even as new development was more explicitly defined as a threat to existing suburban communities

In the absence of any more active strategy, however, population and labour market pressures continue to be major issues for the London city region, even in an age of austerity. Market responses in London have helped to generate a sharply bifurcated private rental sector, with high rents at the top end for a globally mobile elite workforce and a return to intensive overcrowding and multiple occupation at the bottom end. The market for owner occupied housing has faced similar pressures – with prices rising sharply and the divisions between those living in urban mansions, middle class homeowners paying an increasingly large share of their income on relatively modest housing and first time buyers (as well as those excluded from house purchase by the high entry costs) becoming extreme (see, e.g. Dorling 2014). On the edges of the South East the debate has shifted, too, partly as a result of the sharp slowdown in the housing market (which means house builders have little incentive to build large numbers of new properties). Meanwhile new planning frameworks have been introduced (crystallised in the National Planning Policy Framework) which shift the emphasis from notions of sustainability to those of viability. Despite some allusion to wider notions of viability (social and community as well as financial) in practice this implies an even stronger market led vision, in which what ultimately matters is the extent to which housebuilders deem development to be viable for them.

In this context, the Centre for Cities has suggested that one way to foster and sustain economic growth is simply to allow and enable housing growth in the outer suburbs of the South East (Centre for Cities 2013) and this found a policy expression in the City Deal proposed for the South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership area (focused on Milton Keynes) which was markedly different from those proposed for other areas, because it was driven by targets for new housing, with little or no reference to the economic drivers apparent in all the other Deals proposed. In other words it implicitly recognised the suburban status of the area – not an economic node in its own right, but having a catalytic role for the wider region. The decision made locally not to proceed with the proposal, was taken not because the model was felt to wrong but because achieving existing targets was already a challenge and no significant additional government resource was promised.

The area on which our research has focused might almost be thought of as a (sub)urban region within the London City region. But that does not mean that what is emerging looks like the metropolitan regions of the past – indeed most of those living in the region do not seem actively to identify with it (whether defined as the South East Midlands or Milton Keynes and Northamptonshire). Indeed they are likely to be resistant to any such categorisation – in that context, alongside claims to a new urbanity (like that of Milton Keynes) it is hard to avoid the ways in which the new suburban is imagined through a ‘rural’ lens (see Murdoch and Marsden 1994). But the ways in which people live their lives in practice will nevertheless be shaped by the new (sub)urban regionalism (in terms of housing, work or shopping patterns). The ambiguities of suburbia are apparent in these stories from the Greater South East.

If in a broad sense, the Greater South East can be understood as the London city region, it is nevertheless important to recognise the force of the argument that it is an increasingly polycentric one. In other words, for all London’s significance in framing the region in economic, social and political terms and linking it into wider global networks, this is much more than simply a suburban region, in any narrow sense – that is a region of commuters to London. Commuting patterns within the area highlight the extent of the connections, even as commuting to London for high end jobs continues to be significant. The location of back office, logistic and retail functions in the urban centres in the area confirm its position within the functional region, but they also help to confirm that region’s polycentric nature. In other words, its development can only be understood on the basis of recognition of its position within the wider (post metropolitan) region.

New social and economic spaces are emerging, even if they are ambiguous and uncertain, and something significant is happening on the edge of the South East, in ways that require a re-imagination of what defines the urban and the suburban. It is increasingly necessary to move beyond notion of the urban having some sort of defined core, of the drivers of growth being concentrated in the centre and somehow rolling out from there. The polycentric model (even if some centres are more powerful than others) begins to open up the possibility of thinking in terms of some sort of suburban urbanism

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