

Postgraduate Review of
The Inaugural Symposium of the Suburban Cultures Inter-disciplinary Research Network
“The Sensory Suburb”

*The following report has been written by our symposium postgraduate bursary delegate
Kate Scarth, PhD candidate at the University of Warwick, UK*

The Suburban Cultures Inter-disciplinary Research Network’s opening event on the “Sensory Suburb” showcased the depth and breadth of research being done on the suburbs through the combination of a salon session, a keynote address, panel presentations, and a reading of fiction. The salon session, which consisted of eight 10-minute presentations, opened the day by crossing geographical, temporal, generic, and thematic boundaries. Amanda Hagood explored the connection between cinematic representations of the American suburbs and the emergence of environmentalist thought in the 1950s. Ellen Rowley’s paper explored how the church, and specifically the Archbishop McQuaid, created mid-century Dublin suburbs as Catholic spaces. Daphne Medina provided a general context for the mass suburbanization of the American post-war period and teased out the myriad meanings (historical, social, aesthetic, and moral) of the suburban lawn in the specific context of Colorado Springs. Finola O’Kane Crimmins looked at how Lord Fitzwilliam’s status as absentee landlord influenced his decisions regarding the development of his estate in south-east Dublin during the eighteenth-century. My paper investigated Charlotte Smith’s fiction to look at the role of emotions in women’s experience of (suburban) space in the late eighteenth century. Manuela Carvalho provided an overview of the recently launched project *Lisbon Log: Performing the Urban Space*, which will look at the intersections of cultural and artistic practices with representations of the city of Lisbon. Finally, Francesca Negro interrogated the tension between creating a personal, domestic living space and wider (sub)urban space in Saramago’s “The Cavern.”

We then moved to the keynote address, 'Theming and the New Form of Urban Space,' in which Mark Gottdiener asserted that in fact in the United States, the suburb-city divide has disappeared and has been replaced by a new urban form, the multi-centered metropolitan region. These multi-centered regions are produced by deconcentration of the old historical core and reconcentration around new functionally specialized centers, including shopping malls and theme parks. Professor Gottdiener examines these multi-centres through the phenomenon of theming and its more recent variations, branding and architecture as sign value. For example, a theme park will compete with others through specialization by adopting a theme like 'dinosaurs' or 'middle eastern'; or, a fast food chain's architecture will express an immediately recognizable brand that is oriented to the suburban (i.e. driving) consumer, such as golden arches placed on the roadside. We left this talk with an understanding of more than just the current American context, since Gottdiener's richly visual presentation encompassed images from around the globe. Eammon Slater provided a thought-provoking and challenging response to Gottdiener, pointing to such issues as the stranglehold of corporations on all aspects of contemporary life.

In the afternoon panel, Joanne Jacobson read from her evocative memoir on childhood in the suburbs. Particularly interesting was her own analysis of her work and writing process. Moynagh Sullivan then introduced us to the compelling poetry of Rita Ann Higgins and her take on gendered, working-class suburban space. The day ended with a reading from the Booker-prize-winning author, Roddy Doyle, which explored both the dark and light-hearted side of family life in the Dublin suburbs.

Throughout the day there was a strong sense that the suburbs are of particular interest because in the West, at least, they are some of the most important, if not *the* most important, built environments and experiential spaces. The personal nature of the suburbs can give the study of them energy and relevance. One challenge that emerged from the day and can perhaps feed an on-going discussion in the Network is how to maintain the vitality that comes from the personal while maintaining critical distance, refusing to acquiesce to stereotypes, and interrogating the myriad shapes and meanings of the suburbs, rather than The Suburban. As Mark Gottdiener pointed out, comparison between

countries is productive but must be strict in its attention to the different contexts of each region. Indeed, the day showed us that the suburbs are hugely variable, and they provide rich fields of enquiry that vary across space and time.

The day was truly multidisciplinary and demonstrated the wealth and vitality of work being done on the suburbs, but of course could not mention or only briefly touch on some topics. More attention could be drawn to non-Western European/North American suburbs and/or the suburbs before WWII. Others topics that could be addressed, or at least addressed in more detail, are the suburbs and ecology, the environment, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or non-nuclear families, as well as non-residential suburbs. There is plenty of scope for postgraduates and others to contribute to the network by addressing these topics or by entering the compelling and challenging discussion around issues addressed at the inaugural symposium.