

## Postgraduate Review of

The Second Symposium of the Cultures of the Suburbs International Research Network:  
“Out of Control Suburbs? Comparing Representations of Order, Disorder, and Sprawl”

### Day 2

*The following report has been written by symposium delegate Christine Henry, PhD candidate at the University of Maryland.*

With a background in architecture and historic preservation, my research focuses on the social and demographic changes in historically African American historic districts in Washington, DC. I attended the Cultures of the Suburbs symposium in order to expand my understanding of the connections between the city neighborhoods I study and the related neighborhoods in nearby Prince George’s County Maryland as I begin to think of suburbs and the city as more interdependent communities, rather than separate entities.

Day Two of the symposium opened with a keynote address by Dr. Choodamani Nandagopal from Jain University who used extensive visuals to both contextualize and analyze the multiplicity of definitions of suburbs that have developed in conjunction with the rapidly expanding city of Bangalore. One of the themes of Dr. Nandagopal’s presentation was the “slippery” definition of suburbs; as the geographic boundaries between city and suburb become more permeable, so do the land use and settlement patterns. Because my work focuses on historic preservation, I was particularly interested in her discussion of the changes this has wrought on sacred sites and long-established communities. Dr. Nandagopal’s conclusions indicated that while these places were certainly changing, the shift was more of an evolutionary process, where traditional rituals and festivals may have a new scale and appearance but reflect an integration of new ideas and people rather than a replacement of traditions and spaces.

The first morning panel began with Ellen Avitts, who examined the prescribed uses of spaces within suburban homes, using models as a normative baseline she compared the performative use of these spaces in several informants’ houses. Of particular interest was the expressed desire for the ritualized spaces of formal dining rooms and living rooms, as

well as the status spaces such as sitting rooms within large master bedrooms, despite the fact that the informants did not use those spaces for the purposes the names implied. Lisa Choi presented a thought-provoking look at the way that people in the inner suburb of Scarborough use imagination and art to challenge social norms such as the suburban-urban binary, and the visual definition of home. Using images of dogs, fences, and toys crowded on shelves, she examined the ways that imagination and memory complicate definitions of space, a theme also present in Lael Leslie's examination of individual perceptions of sprawl and open space. Both presenters understood that people are makers of their own spaces, rather than simply consumers.

Miriam Gusevich's presentation on the corporate complexes of the 1960s was particularly engaging, as she used the metaphor of fashion to describe the relationship between corporate headquarters, which were more like haute couture, and office parks, which are analogous to ready-to-wear clothes. I found her idea that the city could be seen as a closet where ideas compete for space as particularly compelling, given the perennial pressure in cities in the United States to update many older buildings through a process that amounts to changing clothes, rather than a fundamental change in design of space. Bridget McFadden's paper about the Fermer Labs technoburb was fascinating for the connections she made between the marketing and rhetoric and the development of the community. Her analysis of the use of terms such as pioneer and frontier made me think about how these terms are used in contemporary discussions of urban gentrification, and the continuing positive connotation of language related to discovery commands.

The second panel of the day focused on issues of segregation and integration. Beginning with Hannah Ewence's presentation on racial minorities in British suburbs, the panel provided many provocative glimpses of the ways that culture and race are used as dividers in communities. Her examination of the Eruv was particularly enlightening, which her informants saw as a quasi-colonial claim to territory instead of an expression of faith and culture. Michan Connor's examination of the libertarian town of North Fulton provided an incisive look at the desire of many people to have control over their space, and thus enact implicit racial and class segregation. Gregory Smithsimon's description of African American suburbs outside of Baltimore had many connections to

my current research, and made me consider networks beyond physically contiguous communities. Llana Barber's case study of "Savage Inequalities" in the Lawrence, Massachusetts community through the lens of the school system was intriguing, as she disrupted the urban-suburban dyad of racial and class categorizations.

Whitten Overby's presentation was particularly provocative, questioning the influence of megachurches on the shape of suburban communities, both physically and culturally. Tim Keogh's discussion of housing segregation in Oyster Bay and the perception of job loss caused me to think much more regionally about my research questions concerning choice in housing and employment. The final paper, presented by Katrina Anacker and Christopher Niedt, was an intriguing look at a work in progress to dissect the results of the 2010 Census, though I continue to question the wisdom of using census tracts as proxy for neighborhoods, which have a much more permeable and variable definition when residents are questioned.

The final panel of the day was dedicated to the depiction of the suburbs in literature and film. Gareth Millington and Paul Thifault provided a look at the darker depictions of suburban cultures through film and literature that focused on crime and criminals deliberately contrasted with the mainstream image of placid suburban life. Andrew Byler's discussion of the disconnect between the lived experience of suburbia and the critique provided by mostly straight white males provided a good counterpoint for Jo Gill's examination of John Updike's poetry about telephone poles. All of these sessions reminded me of J. B. Jackson's inclusive views of parking lots and national parks as part of the landscape and character.

Through the multiple sessions and discussions at breaks and meals, I was continually challenged to think about the suburbs in new ways spatially and culturally. I found myself making many connections and notes about the ecosystem of suburbs and cities, and how the interdependence of the two is reflected in the African American historic districts I am currently researching.