

The Cultures of the Suburbs International Research Network: Second Symposium

Out of Control Suburbs? Comparing Representations of Order, Disorder, and Sprawl

Hofstra University 27-28 June 2013

Summary Report by Dr Jo Gill, PI for the Network Project

Day 1 Thursday 27 June 2013

Welcome

The Symposium opened with a “Welcome” from Network Principal Investigator, Jo Gill, and Symposium Host, Chris Niedt.

Keynote: Professor Dolores Hayden

This was followed by a Keynote address from Professor Dolores Hayden, Yale University under the title of “Borderlands, Buildouts, and Big Boxes: Shaping American Suburban Landscapes, 1820-2000.” Professor Hayden’s talk set the scene for the rest of the Symposium by summarizing the history of the cultural landscape (using seven main phases or tropes), and asking key questions about definitions of suburbia, representations of suburban experience specifically as this is inflected by class, ethnicity and gender, the evidence or otherwise for “out-of-control” suburbs and the effects on suburban landscape of (often hidden) subsidies for developers and the like. As Professor Hayden argued in conclusion, we need a critical conversation about suburban growth in the context of relationships between the government, real estate and related interest groups, and citizens.

Chris Niedt’s response to Professor Hayden’s talk noted that the attempt to create a typology of the suburbs brings us usefully back to questions of definition and to a consideration of the significance of different kinds of border and boundary. Questions from the floor covered a range of matters including local zoning codes and the absence of a national land-use policy in the US.

Panel A: Design and Influence in Cities / Suburbs

Kristen Gagnon’s paper drew the audience’s attention to a range of innovative renderings of suburban homes and other spaces including Gordon Matta Clark’s “Splitting” which

cuts a suburban home in half, and other representations of vertical suburbs. Lorenza Pavesi talked about the style and effects of London Underground marketing strategies in the early decades of the twentieth-century, specifically in relation to contemporary critical perceptions of “suburban mediocrity.” James McArdle, via Skype, traced recent photographic explorations of suburban travel and suburban wilderness as it evolves on the perimeters of now defunct rail tracks e.g. via the Parisian Chemin de Fer: <http://drjamesmcardle.com/2013/05/28/wild-rails-and-nervous-nystagmus/> Stacey Hunter’s paper looked at manifestations of the New Urbanism in Scotland, focusing in particular at ongoing development in Chapelton of Elsieburn which, she argued, is selective in its historical and architectural borrowings i.e. which takes its style from locations which are not necessarily appropriate to the site or its history. Yannis Tzanini’s paper traced the migration and emigration of settlers in Almere, a suburb of Amsterdam. Soumya Chavan offered a case study of one particular suburb of Bangalore, Rajarajeshwari Nagar, which she used to trace the longer history and ongoing impact of suburban development esp. as this effects ritual and religious practice.

Panel B: Social and Spatial Order / Disorder

Alexandra Murphy’s paper discussed the phenomenon of litterers, and citizens’ perceptions of littering behavior in relation to ethnicity and poverty, in the suburb of Penn Mills. João Nunes’ presentation focused on spatial order and place making in the suburb of Amadora, Lisbon, Portugal; he looked in particular at the relationship between lived experience of inhabitants who were trying to change the conditions of the town, the government, and the press. In her paper on suburban gardens, Shibolet Shechter asked how individual suburban gardens (comprising 1m acres and 45% of suburban land) might be used collectively to contribute to suburban land management and sustainability. On similar lines, Scott Silsbe’s paper explored the development and changing perceptions of the Green Leaf trail – a pedestrian corridor – amidst a suburban community in Suffolk County, New York.

Panel C: Planning

This panel opened with Paul Burton’s paper on perceptions of space, design, and lifestyle in suburban Australia particularly in the context of debates about taste. Carlos Reimers’ presentation examined informal suburbs – or colonias – which have emerged outside formal zoning practices in borderland states; such housing is often characterized by the subdivision of single-family homes into “accessory apartments.” Similarly, Maroun Kassab discussed the role of multifamily building in the Lebanon – a social need often delivered by building vertically on the top of existing structures. He noted the role of the Lebanese Diaspora in funding ongoing suburban growth. Keith Wilhite’s offered a close

reading of the rhetoric – or what he calls the “planning discourse” of the New Urbanism; he looked in particular at the strategies deployed by the key text of the New Urbanism (Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck’s *Suburban Nation*) in soliciting its readers’ engagement and assent. Finally, Carol Hager drew the audience’s attention to debates about the development or preservation of the New Jersey Pinelands, offering the area as an example of how relationships between the needs of preservation, regional coherence, and local empowerment might be negotiated.

Day 2 Friday 27 June 2013

Keynote: Professor Choodamani Nandagopal

Professor Nandagopal's keynote introduced delegates to the issues facing Bangalore as it continues to grow as a global and suburbanized city (as she explained; between 1947 and 2007, Bangalore has grown from 69km² to 716km² and from a population of 410,000 to over 7,000,000). Change is the only constant here. In the Professor's words: "suburbs are losing their tags as 'suburbs,' overlapping with other suburbs, and evolving into new suburbs." Bangalore's new Metro has proved a particular factor in shaping suburban change; it has consolidated Bangalore's shape as a city of different sectors and, while, attempting to bring order in the face of disorder, has also contributed to the despoliation of established places and communities (e.g. sacred sites, ancient trees, century old bungalows and compounds). The challenges now faced by Bangalore are similar to those in other suburban areas and include waste management, slum clearance, medical facilities, and the provision of social and play spaces.

Panel D: Perceptions of Home / Defining the Suburbs

Ellen Avitts from Central Washington University opened this panel with her paper on the design and marketing of suburban model (or "show") homes and the inversion or undermining of the much-vaunted ideal in everyday practice. Her interest is in the ways and means by which residents "circumvent the prescribed conventions." Lisa Choi of York University, Toronto, spoke about homely and unhomely (familiar and uncanny) domestic spaces, and in particular about residents' attempts to disrupt binaries and to reconfigure their memories by various disruptive artistic (primarily photographic) practices. Lael Leslie's paper looked at the contentious issue of the use of space in so-called sprawling suburban communities; her research finds that perceptions of sprawl, and ideas about how best to use open space, vary widely from resident to resident. Miriam Gusevich looked back to the establishment of corporate campuses in the 1950s and 1960s as a reminder of the ways in which fashion (i.e. the trend of the moment) has shaped suburban space. In like manner, Bridget McFadden's presentation focused on the impact of atomic-age technologies on the design and location of suburban space e.g. in the case of the Fermi Labs outside Chicago, built to house atomic research, and promoted using the rhetoric of pioneering and frontiership.

Panel E: Segregation / Integration and the Suburbs

Panel E opened with Hannah Ewence's paper on suburbanization in the suburbs of North West London. The emphasis of her work is on the experience of Jewish suburban

communities in Britain and, in this paper, on the background – and reaction – to the establishment of an “Eruv” (or symbolic enclosure) around the boundaries of one particular area. Michan Connor’s paper similarly looked at relationships and conflict within and between suburban and urban communities, with an emphasis on the ways in which wealthy white suburban communities may have sought to avoid financially contributing to the maintenance of what they perceive to be the (undeserving?) urban poor. Gregory Smithsimon’s paper traced the causes and effects of neighborhood decline, specifically as experienced by middle-class African American communities; using the concept of “punctuated equilibrium,” and taking certain areas of Baltimore as his example, Smithsimon argued for a new understanding of the pace and impact of change on African American residents. Llana Barber addressed the perennial issue of suburban schooling, particularly as inflected through the lens of race, class, and ethnicity, here using Lawrence, Massachusetts, as her case study. Tim Keogh similarly looked back at the long history of suburban inequality and offered a critical reading of perceived causes and consequences from structural barriers (such as zoning) through to a more nebulous set of expectations (and allegations) about perceived difference. In Whitten Overby’s paper, we were asked to consider the visual rhetoric of the new suburban megachurches and, finally, in Katrina Anacker and Christopher Niedt’s presentation, to look in detail at local differences in suburban immigration. Using early data from the 2010 census, Anacker and Niedt argued for a more nuanced and site-specific sense of suburban differentiation.

Panel F: The Suburbs in Fiction / Poetry / Film & TV

Gareth Millington’s paper offered a suggestive reading of particular areas of suburban Essex as inflected through contemporary film and television. Similarly, Paul Thifault discussed the representation of the suburbs in the work of Patricia Highsmith, with specific reference to *The Neighborly Mr Ripley*. Jo Gill’s paper on John Updike’s suburban poetry asked us to consider the ways in which poetry in the post-war years has helped construct a vision or visions of suburbia. Finally, Andrew Byler’s paper considered the persistent emphasis in the scholarly field on the experience (and discontents) of white, middle-class suburbanites and asked what effect this disproportionate emphasis has had on the broader parameters of suburban studies.

Roundtable

In closing, delegates took part in a brief discussion about possible future research and collaborations. Jo Gill and Chris Niedt invited delegates to continue their discussions via e-mail (using the delegates’ contact list circulated by the Network Administrator) and the Cultures of the Suburbs website. They reminded delegates that the Network is there to

facilitate new work in the field, and recommended that they should contact one of the Network partners or the Administrator if they wished to suggest particular ideas, or establish new contacts. Jo Gill and Christ Niedt noted that there are plans afoot to establish a Suburban Studies Association and to publish a special issue of a journal or, indeed, to set up a new journal in the field. They also reminded delegates of the Network's next (and final) event, the closing conference to be held at the University of Exeter, UK, from 19 to 21 June 2014 on the theme of "Imagining the Suburbs." A flyer giving "Advance Notice" was in the conference pack; a more formal Call For Papers will follow. In closing the Symposium, Jo and Chris thanked the UK and local organizers, Jill Sullivan and Ina Katz, the keynotes, Dolores Hayden and Choodamani Nandagopal, and all participants.