

Imagining the Suburbs Conference

University of Exeter 19 to 21 June 2014

Conference Report



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Almost 50 delegates met in mid-June 2014 at the University of Exeter, UK, for 3 days of stimulating discussions on the theme of 'Imagining the Suburbs.' This was the third and final symposium / conference of the Leverhulme Trust Cultures of the Suburbs International Research Network.

Conference papers were scheduled thematically in panels (sometimes in parallel sessions) covering a range of areas including Children, Families and Elders in Suburbia; Mapping the Urban / Suburban Landscape; Performance and Locality, and Suburban Growth and Public Policy. As the titles of this selection of panels indicate, the Conference was notable for its interdisciplinarity; speakers were drawn from the arts and humanities (including literary studies, film studies, photography, and art history), the social sciences (sociology, geography) and from applied schools of design, planning, architecture, and cognate fields. The Conference was also highly international in make-up and focus; delegates came from the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, Ireland, Austria, Japan, France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Speakers included PhD students, early career scholars, established academics, arts practitioners, and professionals in various fields.

Key questions and insights that recurred included those relating to narrative, to genre, to attachment (to places, rituals or communities), to the relationship between adaptation and mitigation, to change (and resistance thereto), to memory and aspiration or the past and future of the suburbs, to design, politics, migration and marginalization.

Keynote lectures were delivered on the opening and closing days of the conference. On Thurs 19th June, Professor Roger Keil of the Global Suburbanisms project (York University, Toronto, Canada) offered a provocative and highly engaging talk on political change in suburbia – with particular emphasis on the relationship between local and global activism – entitled 'The Wild Suburb: Bringing the Periphery Back into the Urban.' Keil urged his audience to 'think differently' about suburban social and political life. On Sat 21st June, Michael Rosen, children's author and Professor of Children's Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, delivered a keynote talk and public lecture, attended by conference delegates and some 35 local residents, on his own childhood memories of the suburbs, entitled 'Exiles and Natives: North-west London 1946-1969.' Rosen's talk brought the post-war suburbs back to life and touched on many experiences that proved familiar even to those from widely disparate suburban backgrounds.

Friday evening (20th June) saw the launch of the Network's special issue of *Riptide* (the renowned creative writing journal) under the title 'Imagining the Suburbs.' The journal features a range of original writing including poetry, autobiography, and short fiction. See: <http://www.riptidejournal.co.uk/shop/riptide-volume-10/>

In addition to the two keynote lectures and 30 individual presentations, the conference featured a plenary panel on 'New Partnerships in Suburban Studies' (Fri 20th June). This brought together representatives of cognate projects and Networks including Larry Levy from the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra, Long Island (<http://www.hofstra.edu/ACADEMICS/CSS/index.html>); Bridget Bennett from the AHRC Imagining the Place of Home project at Leeds, UK (http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125130/imagining_the_place_of_home/), and Robin Hutchinson from The Community Brain (<http://thecommunitybrain.org/>), and provided the audience with a stimulating opportunity to discuss future collaborations.

An informal closing roundtable on Sat 21st June on the theme of 'Building a Legacy for the Network,' chaired by Martin Dines (Kingston) and Larry Levy (Hofstra), gave delegates a chance to recap on their experience of the Network and conference, and to put plans in place for the future. These might include: (1) Seeking onward funding from various potential sources (research councils, foundations, benefactors etc) in order to continue the Network's research activities; (2) organizing future events (e.g. symposia or a conference); (3) collating submissions from current or future activities for various publications (edited collection, special journal issues etc); (4) revising and upgrading the website, (5) improving our communications strategy so that might better share our expertise, including providing an 'experts/speakers available' index for journalists, organizations (governmental and NGO) and businesses; (6) exploring the creation of grants and scholarships particularly for younger participant researchers, (7) reaching out to previous participants / interested parties in order to supplement and develop the ideas above.

Further information including abstracts of each presentation and reports from some of our delegates is available via the Cultures of the Suburbs website (<http://suburbs.exeter.ac.uk/>).

"That's what's so exciting about this conference: suburbs matter" (Allan Cochrane, Open University)

"You've got to imagine the suburbs because the reality doesn't exist" (Paul Burton, Griffith University)

"The suburbs are rich in people, ideas, imagination, character" (Robin Hutchinson, The Community Brain)