

## 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 1

*The following report has been written by symposium postgraduate bursary delegate  
Kristen Gagnon, PhD student at Carleton University, Canada*

The second symposium of the Cultures of the Suburbs International Research Network, aptly entitled “Out of Control Suburbs? Comparing Representations of Order, Disorder and Sprawl”, took place from June 27-28, 2013 at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. A stones-throw away from Levittown, New York, the symposium spoke to a wide range of topics, disciplines, cultures and geographies, clearly indicating that the academic discourse on suburbia has been anything but exhausted. Below is an overview of the first day of the conference.

The symposium opened with a keynote address by Professor Dolores Hayden of Yale University. Professor Hayden outlined a history of suburban typologies in her presentation on “Borderlands, Build Outs and Big Boxes”. Referencing her work in “A Field Guide to Sprawl”, in addition to films such as Buster Keaton’s *One Week* (1920) and H.C. Potter’s *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream Home* (1948), as well as historical photographs and magazine adverts for suburban developments, Hayden illustrated the changing nature of the ideals and physical forms in which North American suburbs have manifested themselves.

Following Professor Hayden’s presentation, the morning session saw speakers from all corners of the globe. Beginning with a panel focused on “Design and Influence in the Cities/Suburbs”, Panel A took those attending the symposium from Post-War England to Almere (the *melting-pot* of Amsterdam’s suburbs), New Urbanist Scotland, Rajarajeshwari Nagar of Bangalore, and ultimately the *liminal* place/no-place of *Railway*

*Margins*. This multi-national journey showed vastly different sides to the understanding of the suburbs as places of culture. While North American cities are often seen as banal spaces, presenter Yannis Tzaninis explored the planned 1970s community of Almere, Holland, and its changing demographics. Currently experiencing great change in its population as the town shifts from the “pioneers” who first moved there to a new wave of residents, the town is struggling to find a new identity – one that one resident described as a melting-pot, due to Almere’s now multi-cultural and diverse population.

From the Netherlands to Scotland’s attempt at adapting a New Urbanist typology, while still maintain an understanding of traditional Scottish town-planning, Stacey Hunter presented a paper on the shape and impact of transnational New Urbanism, as seen in its attempt to meet Scotland’s regional specificity in Knockroon. This paper showed the struggles that such an established culture faces when trying to adapt to new ways of planning, building and living, and allowed reflection on current forms of town-planning in comparison to those which are well established both culturally and in terms of their urban traditions. This negotiation and coming together of the new with the traditional was then further explored by presenter Soumya Manjunath Chavan whose paper focused on cultural rituals, such as the *Karaga Festival* in the Bangalore suburb of Rajarajeshwari Nagar. This bridging of the urban and suburban through cultural activities was also noted as being embraced by the youth of the area, and showed the suburban landscape as a place of possibility and meaning.

The afternoon brought two panels focused on “Social and Spatial Order/Disorder” and “Planning”. During these sessions, topics ranging from the importance of the garden to new ways of understanding litter were discussed. During Shibboleth Shechter’s paper on *A Mosaic of Gardens*, the importance of the private garden to Britons was analyzed and detailed. Unlike the often unused sprawling lawn of the North American suburb, the English garden was seen as a place of great activity and place of cultural connection and importance. Making up a notable area of the country, these gardens could be understood as both a large physical but also cultural entity, and an important part of the British psyche. And from the garden to the side of the road, Alexandra K Murphy presented on

the intriguing topic of litter and the preconceived prejudices we have when we view it in a neighbourhood. This led Murphy to the conclusion that litter is a larger issue than laziness or disrespect for the environment; rather, it is often a result of poor infrastructure or a lack of usable garbage receptacles in pedestrian-heavy areas. Ultimately Murphy's message was that we are quick to make assumptions when we see litter, but rather than prejudge the situation, or assume that it is the result of a certain group of people, that we should look to the bigger issues as ways of finding solutions. The afternoon then went on to address the role of green trails in suburban areas, the relationship between literature and the suburbs and the impact of the suburbanization in Lebanon. These papers, in addition to the keynote address, led to a full day of new awarenesses.

However, what was most evident from the culmination of these papers was how far-reaching the suburban discourse is, and how much has been left untouched. This was perhaps best stated by presenter Paul Burton with his closing line, "further research is always necessary." And that is what these presenters intend to do.