



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

North American suburbia in flux

Nijman, J.B.F.

Published in:
Environment and Planning A

DOI:
[10.1068/a4701ge](https://doi.org/10.1068/a4701ge)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Nijman, J. (2015). North American suburbia in flux. *Environment and Planning A*, 47(1), 3-9. DOI: 10.1068/a4701ge

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Guest editorial

North American suburbia in flux

Introduction

This theme issue explores the nature of suburbs and suburbanization in present-day North America. We have known, or at least suspected, for some time, that the stereotypical notion of the suburb that emerged in the 1950s has been diverging from metropolitan realities. The early postwar ‘sitcom’ suburb, singularly dominated by White, middle-class families, in spacious and green environs with single-family homes, was short-lived and soon evolved into diversified forms in expanding and increasingly complex metropolitan configurations. We know that metropolitan areas have continued to expand outwards while amalgamating with cities in the region and the notion of the polycentric urban region has become widely accepted among scholars and policy makers. The concepts of edge cities and edgeless cities have been added to the lexicon. Still, the terms suburb, suburbia, suburbanism, and suburbanization have stuck, in scholarly or professional jargon as well as in colloquial discourse—they are increasingly difficult to define and few of us could, but the labels persist. Teaford (1997) and others after him (eg, Knox, 2008) may have proclaimed the end of the common suburb nearly two decades ago, but it is not so clear what followed in their place; the notion of suburbia, no matter how commonplace, has become ever more complex. What is the nature of processes of suburbanization today, what is a suburb, and how do suburbs fit in larger metropolitan constellations?

The four papers in this theme issue seek to clarify the meaning of suburbanization today in four American metropolitan areas: San Francisco, Toronto, Miami, and the North Carolina Piedmont metropolitan region. The papers are written against the backdrop of the idea of the classical North American suburb and they concentrate on recent change. North America may be considered the birthplace of the modern suburb but the phenomenon of suburbanization soon went global. The papers in this issue are, in fact, part of a large project on “Global Suburbanism” that includes research in Europe, South Asia, China, Africa, and South America (see, eg, Hamel and Keil, 2015). If we find ourselves at a historical moment of planetary urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2011), most of this urban growth is occurring in ‘suburban’ environs or at least in periurban areas (*The Economist* 2014). We also find ourselves in the midst of intense debates about the portability of (Western) urban theory, larded with exceptionalist claims in regard to ‘postcolonial’ cities and the ‘Global South’, and more generally about the importance of a comprehensive comparative urbanism (Nijman, 2015; Peck, 2015). In that sense, this collection of papers is not just relevant to North America. If the suitability of conventional (Western) notions of suburbanism to other parts of the world is in question, it is well worth the effort to investigate the continued significance of the notion to North America itself.

Historicizing North American suburbanization

In the wake of the Second World War, suburbanization accelerated to such unprecedented levels that it fundamentally reordered cities across North America. The common emphasis on the archetypal suburb from the 1950s, however, all too often overshadows the fact that the process of suburbanization has much deeper historical roots. This is not the place to elaborate on the history of the American suburb [for a more extensive argument, see Jackson (1985) and Nijman and Clery (2015a)] but it is important, before considering the four papers in this

theme issue, to emphasize that suburbanization has been part of the evolving metropolitan landscape for well over 150 years now.

The ideal of the American suburb dates back to the beginning of the industrial revolution. In the 19th century, cities became sites of industrial production, often with detrimental environmental effects, and they grew much more dense. According to authors like Fishman (1987) and others, this resulted in a growing interest of the elites in new housing on the urban periphery: home as a refuge from work, as a source of happiness and goodness. Upper-class status became associated with mansions on large estates in a quiet, lush, suburban environment. Suburbanization proceeded faster in the United States than in England, or elsewhere, because industrialization, too, was more vigorous and sustained, and as such fueled a more significant response by way of suburbanization.

There was another, cultural, reason why suburbanization became such a salient expression in the American landscape. The individualized, nuclear, family was very much an American institution (a corollary to the ‘American Dream’) and demanded a single-family home—which was easier to realize in the spacious suburbs than in the city center. Hayden (2003, pages 5–6) observes that: “Unlike any other affluent civilization, Americans have idealized the house and yard rather than the model neighborhood or the ideal town.”

From the late 19th century through the (‘roaring’) 1920s, the suburbs became less elitist and attracted growing numbers of middle-class families. This reflected the appeal of suburban living among the middle classes and access by way of, especially, streetcars, but it also testified to the ‘industrialization’ of suburbanization. Increasingly, it seems, demand for suburban living was being stimulated on the supply side. Developers enlarged their area of operations, took a broader view of the urban, and began to promote urban peripheries, often working in partnership with transit owners (street cars), utility companies, and local government (Nijman and Clery, 2015a). The exclusivity of the suburb, the former bourgeois utopia, was under pressure from the very beginning. In a number of big cities, suburbs had formed with a strong working-class identity, often along freight-rail corridors (Harris, 1992). On the eve of World War 2, suburbs had emerged as a new ‘urban’ form and had already become an important part of the metropolitan landscape. Thus far, it had been a relatively slow process and massive changes were still ahead.

After World War 2, when demand for housing exploded (due to unfulfilled demand in the wake of the Great Depression followed by World War 2; and the baby boom), suburbanization took on such massive dimensions that it altered the urban order. From 1950 to 1980 the suburban population of the United States tripled; by 1970 more people lived in suburbs than in either central cities or rural areas; by the year 2000 the suburban population exceeded that of central cities and rural areas combined. Suburbanization was not new, but sometimes enough of a quantitative change implies a qualitative transformation. The United States had become a ‘suburban nation’ (Duany et al, 2000; Muller, 1981).

The acceleration of suburbanization in the 1960s and the emergence of the stereotypical postwar suburb, particularly in the United States, was in part related to the decline of many central cities. Deindustrialization played its part in terms of declining employment and selective out-migration from central cities. Inner-city decay had the effect of reinforcing earlier idealistic visions of the suburb. At the same time, suburbanization was, more than ever, driven and facilitated by corporate interests and government policies. It had become, one might say, the business of an extremely powerful corporate conglomerate that employed (and helped generate) the American suburban imaginary to full effect. It included huge corporations such as the big automakers (which offered a helping hand in the demise of the electric streetcar) and General Electric (which had embarked on the mass production of household appliances for single-family homes); local ‘growth machines’ (Molotch, 1976) consisting of developers, builders, and banks; local governments that provided conducive

zoning and regulatory frameworks, and sometimes direct subsidies; and, last but not least, a federal government that was central to the financing of homeownership, the construction of highways, and that in various ways espoused suburban ideologies.

Such was the image of the archetypal North American suburb in the second half of the 20th century: largely residential, middle-class, White, spacious, safe, predictable, stable, and dominated by single-dwelling residential patterns. In most respects, the archetypal suburb stands in contrast to, and is defined in opposition to, the central city. Central cities have mixed land-use functions, are more locally heterogeneous, denser, less stable, and less safe. Even if metropolitan areas have expanded substantially and grown more complex and polycentric, the suburban ideal appears to have lingered. It is a far cry from the 19th-century ‘bourgeois utopia’ but it remains firmly wedded to middle-class values as to what constitutes ‘good living’.

Four cases: San Francisco, Toronto, Piedmont, and Miami

The four papers in this theme issue shed light on the recent development of the metropolitan areas at hand, their recent and current processes of suburbanization, and the nature of their present-day suburbs. It is obviously a small sample of cities but they are a geographically diverse set, covering the west (San Francisco), the east (Piedmont), the north (Toronto), and the south (Miami). The approaches and methodologies vary (from structuralist to historical–discursive to quantitative–empirical) but they all situate suburbanization in relation to overall metropolitan growth and change and they are all sensitive to geographical context and scale.

In their paper on San Francisco, Walker and Schafran (2015) draw attention to the enormous size of the Bay Area in which the City of San Francisco is (historically) only one of three central cities and where the entire urban region has been constantly reconfigured at various scales. The metropolitan region has in part evolved as a result of amalgamation, the gradual fusion of hitherto distinct (sub)urban areas. The drivers of suburbanization, they suggest, are structural and combine both demand and supply:

“Suburbanization is driven not only by homeownership and transport, but by flows of capital into the process of land development and construction. Suburbanization is often treated as a phenomenon of cultural preferences in housing and automobility ..., but capital has its own logic for making cities and suburbs” (page 17).

The wealth generated in this part of the country (led by Silicon Valley) has been instrumental in the creation of highly affluent and low-density suburban developments. The City of San Francisco is among the densest central cities in the US, but located in the least dense metropolitan area. The City of San Francisco is no longer the economic center of gravity it once was and, today, there are more commuters heading south from San Francisco than north into the city, epitomized by the Google and Facebook shuttles ferrying workers who are gentrifying the city’s erstwhile lower income neighborhoods. Exceptionally high real estate values in the City of San Francisco and in Silicon Valley have pushed lower income households into the East Bay suburbs that now spill into the Central Valley. Traditional central city–suburb dichotomies are hard to fit to the realities of the Bay Area, and suburbia, if defined mainly in terms of residential function and low densities, is extremely fragmented in terms of well-being, race, and access to employment centers.

In his paper on Toronto, Harris (2015) argues that this city never quite corresponded to North American stereotypes that are biased to the US context. Canadian cities overall are more compact, experienced less inner-city decline, less middle-class flight, and spawned more diverse suburban environments. Importantly, according to Harris, Canada also was less influenced by ideological discourses about suburbia and views of the suburbs have tended to be more diverse; compared with the US, suburbs were not glorified as much in earlier times and were less vilified in more recent years. In the case of Toronto, suburbs have always come in

all shapes and sizes, in part the result of the settlement of large numbers of immigrants across the central city and suburbs (also see Keil et al, 2015). Today, about two thirds of Canada's population, or about 80% of the metropolitan population, live in suburban environments, slightly less than in the US (Gordon and Janzen, 2013). This is related to the greater vitality, generally speaking, of Canadian inner cities. Harris observes that in Toronto, it is "city folk who exhibit the strongest preference for a particular built environment and lifestyle. Instead, suburbanites buy what they can afford" (page 43). He also emphasizes the importance of public 'narratives' about the metropolitan landscape, narratives that inevitably seem to refer to 'city' and 'suburbs' but that stay at the most general level with little appreciation for the richness of Toronto's metropolitan geographies. Such nuances include the gentrification of the central city and adjacent areas in part by young families with children, along with increased high-rise (owner-occupied) condo-living.

The paper by Wei and Knox (2015) provides a detailed analysis of spatial transformations and neighborhood change in the Carolina Piedmont metropolitan region, between 1980 and 2010. More specifically, this paper concentrates on the two main metropolitan regions: the Charlotte-Gastonia-Rock Hill MSA (CGR) and the Raleigh-Durham-Cary CSA (RDC). Compared with the other cases in this theme issue, these are relatively small metros (respectively, about 1.8 million and 1.6 million inhabitants), with relatively recent, fast, growth. Both metros have dynamic economies, with CGR having undergone major growth in banking-related industries while RDC's development has been closely tied to the North Carolina research triangle. Both metro areas have formed within the past half-century through fast growth and regional consolidation. The result, say the authors, has been a "polycentric structure that incorporates urban realms and corridors, 'edge cities', 'edgeless cities', 'exurbs', 'micropolitan' centers and 'boomburbs'" (page 54). In their detailed longitudinal analysis of neighborhood change, the authors observe generally stable patterns across metropolitan areas in terms of class, race, and demography; at finer scales, however, they discern growing fragmentation and diversification that is in good part explained, it seems, by employment access within the new economy (finance and high-tech sectors, especially). They observe this differentiation in suburbs as well in central cities.

Finally, the paper by Nijman and Clery (2015b) sketches the historical and geographic outlines of urban and suburban growth in metropolitan Miami. This is followed by a finer scale study of six selected 'suburbs' along with their recent evolution, composition, and position within the metro area. If the other three cases can be said to be exceptional in one sense or the other, so could Miami. Its origins as a beach resort town, relatively recent emergence as a major city, and very high immigration rates from Latin America—with significant economic disparities among those immigrants—would be enough to place it outside the North American mainstream. The paper considers suburbanization at two different scales. At the county level, the part of the metro area centered on the City of Miami itself (Miami-Dade County) can in some ways be considered more urban and less suburban than the part centered on Fort Lauderdale, to the north (Broward County). At a finer scale, the diversity of the metropolitan landscape and the mix of urban and suburban traits within the area's more than sixty municipalities are striking. City-suburb distinctions rarely correspond to conventional stereotypes and most areas that qualify in some respects as suburban (eg, low density or a long distance from the old urban core), do not in others (eg, low household income or mixed land use). The paper argues that suburbia is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that, in the modern metropolis, can manifest itself partially, and in different ways, in various intraurban areas. In Miami, at least, the suburb, as a circumscribed space, has become a rarity as its composite qualities are scattered across the metropolitan landscape (Nijman and Clery, 2015b).

Comparative notes

A striking commonality of the four papers is that all make exceptionalist claims: San Francisco, Toronto, Carolina Piedmont, and Miami, are all thought to be unique in one way or another. Perhaps these claims are overstated and infused with mild forms of myopia. On the other hand, they seem accurate in the sense that these four metropolitan areas are further away than ever from the ‘typical’ North American city (or suburb). They are, of course, only four cases and can hardly be thought of as representative of metropolitan North America. It should be noted, too, that all four are relatively vibrant areas with strong economies and (inter)national connections. But these cases also suggest that the ‘typical’ North American city or suburb may be more imagined than real, with North American metropolitan realities considerably more diverse and complex than generally assumed (also see Nijman and Clery, 2015a).

Second, an interesting aspect of the notion of the suburb is that it connotes a settled, stable, situation. Certainly this was important to the 1950s idea of the suburb wherein white middle-classes families had ‘arrived’. The suburb embodied the achievement of an ideal, the good life; it was harmonious, predictable, and secure, and *change* was not a part of that dreamy constellation. In reality the suburb as a spatial entity has been a momentary piece of an urban puzzle that is always reconfiguring—physically, economically, socially, and politically. Each of the papers testifies to the profound dynamics of these metropolitan areas. Suburbs are rarely stable spaces simply because they are integral parts of a greater metropolitan dynamic.

Third, all four metropolitan areas have undergone considerable population growth in the past half-century. In the case of the three US metros, this was accompanied by substantial areal expansion, largely through amalgamation, and this resulted in sprawling polycentric urban regions. Toronto’s growth, in comparison, was more from the center outwards, maintaining relatively high densities and compactness. Toronto’s suburbs, it appears, tend to be defined more singularly in relation to downtown Toronto whereas in the US metros, suburbs may be oriented to one of several central cities—if, indeed, ‘suburbs’ are still oriented to central cities at all.

Fourth, suburbanization in each of the four metro areas has been strongly influenced by substantial net in-migration. In all cases except Piedmont, foreign immigrants made up a large share of the newcomers, resulting in suburban areas with high concentrations of particular ethnic groups. In the Piedmont metropolitan region, domestic in-migration prevailed, even more than most other Sunbelt cities. In Cary, as the authors note, the new economy has attracted so many workers from across the country that the area is locally referred to as CARY: Containment Area for Relocated Yankees. In all four metros, high rates of in-migration has contributed to diversification of the suburban landscape.

Fifth, in all four cases, suburbia has become increasingly diverse *and* segregated. In this sense, suburbia has lost more and more of its *spatial* integrity. Today’s ‘suburbs’ come in all shapes and forms, in terms of race, ethnicity, class, built environment, distance to city centers, or land use. The mortgage crisis of recent years exposed the precarious financial position of many new suburbanites. More and more people of different economic backgrounds have made their way to suburbia but individual suburbs are increasingly separate and unequal. Racial unrest in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson in 2014, of the sort that would have occurred in a central city just twenty years ago, underscored just how much that suburban landscape has changed (also see Logan, 2014). The common distinction, nowadays, between inner and outer suburban rings in metropolitan areas is too simplistic and downplays the complexity of present-day metropolitan constellations.

Finally, each of the four metros has in recent years experienced gentrification and a revival of their central cities. The pull of ‘urban’ living for upper-middle-class Whites and the presence of ‘vertical suburbs’ in and near downtown areas imply a reversal of yesteryear’s

‘White flight’. Importantly, it adds to the diminishing distinction between suburbia and central cities in terms of class, race, and lifestyle. It is not just the suburbs that have been changing, so have central cities. That does not mean, of course, that the ‘suburban’ tide has turned. Even if central city growth of some North American metropolitan areas has in recent years exceeded suburban growth, as some have claimed (eg, Frey 2012), the differences in relative growth rates are very small. Other researchers, using different definitions and measurements of what constitutes a suburb, find that the alleged resurgence of central cities is exaggerated (eg, Kolko, 2012). In absolute terms, most urban growth will continue to take place in suburban, periurban, or exurban areas. And many of those areas have started to look very different from what once everyone knew was a suburb.

Jan Nijman

Centre for Urban Studies, Department of Geography, Planning, and International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam; e-mail: Nijman@uva.nl

Acknowledgements. The research for this theme issue was part of a larger project on “Global Suburbanism,” a Major Collaborative Research Initiative funded by the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council (see: <http://www.yorku.ca/suburbs/>). The author is thankful to Peter Muller for sharing his knowledge and insights in the history and geography of suburbanization in North America.

References

- Brenner N, Schmid C, 2011, “Planetary urbanization”, in *Urban Constellations* Ed. M Gandy (Jovis, Berlin) pp 10–13
- Duany A, Plater-Zyberk E, Speck J, 2001 *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (North Point Press, New York)
- Fishman R, 1987 *Bourgeois Utopias. The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (Basic Books, New York)
- Frey W H, 2012, “Demographic reversal: cities thrive, suburbs sputter” *Brookings Series: State of Metropolitan America* number 58, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/06/29-cities-suburbs-frey>
- Gordon D L A, Janzen M, 2013, “Suburban nation: estimating the size of Canada’s suburban population” *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* **30**(3) 197–220
- Hamel P, Keil R, 2015 *Suburban Governance: A Global View* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto)
- Harris R, 1992, “The unplanned blue-collar suburb in its heyday, 1900–1940”, in *Geographical Snapshots of North America* Ed. D Janelle (Guilford Press, New York) pp 94–99
- Harris R, 2015, “Using Toronto to explore three suburban stereotypes, and vice versa” *Environment and Planning A* **47** 30–49
- Hayden D, 2003 *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (Pantheon Books, New York)
- Jackson K, 1985 *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford University Press, New York)
- Keil R, Hamel P, Chou E, Williams K, 2015, “Modalities of suburban governance in Canada”, in *Suburban Governance: A Global View* Eds P Hamel, R Keil (University of Toronto Press, Toronto) in press
- Kolko J, 2012, “Even after the housing bust, Americans still love the suburbs” *Newgeography.com*, <http://www.newgeography.com/content/003139-even-after-housing-bust-americans-still-love-suburbs>
- Logan J, 2014, “Separate and unequal in suburbia”, Census brief prepared for US2010, Brown University, <http://www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/Data/Report/report12012014.pdf>
- Molotch H, 1976, “The city as a growth machine: toward a political economy of place” *The American Journal of Sociology* **82** 309–332
- Muller P O, 1981 *Contemporary Suburban America* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ)
- Nijman J, 2015, “The theoretical imperative of comparative urbanism” *Regional Studies* (in press)

-
- Nijman J, Clery T, 2015a, "The United States: suburban imaginaries and metropolitan realities", in *Suburban Governance: A Global View* Eds P Hamel, R Keil (University of Toronto Press, Toronto) in press
- Nijman J, Clery T, 2015b, "Rethinking suburbia: a case study of metropolitan Miami" *Environment and Planning A* **47** 69–88
- Knox P L, 2008 *Metroburbia, USA* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ)
- Peck J, 2015, "Cities beyond compare?" *Regional Studies* forthcoming
- Teaford J C, 1997 *Post-suburbia: Government and Politics in the Edge Cities* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD)
- The Economist* 2014, "A planet of suburbs", 6 December
- Walker R, Schafran A, 2015, "The strange case of the Bay Area" *Environment and Planning A* **47** 10–29
- Wei F, Knox P L, 2015, "Neighborhood change and spatial transformation" *Environment and Planning A* **47** 50–68