Suburbs in transition: new approaches to suburban history

RUTH MCMANUS and PHILIP J. ETHINGTON*
Geography Department, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9.
History Department, 268 SOS Building, University of Southern California,
Los Angeles, CA, 90089-00343, USA

ABSTRACT: The history of suburbs has received so much scholarly attention in recent decades that it is time to take stock of what has been established, in order to discern aspects of suburbs that are still unknown. To date, the main lines of inquiry have been dedicated to the origins, growth, diverse typologies, culture and politics of suburbs, as well as to newer topics such as the gendered nature of suburban space. The vast majority of these studies have been about particular times and places. The authors propose a new perspective on the study of suburbs, one which will begin to investigate the transformations of suburbs after they have been established. Taking the entire era from the mid-nineteenth century through to the late twentieth century as a whole, it is argued that suburbs should be subjected to a longitudinal analysis, examining their development in the context of metropolises that usually enveloped them within a generation or two of their founding. It is proposed that investigation of these 'transitions' should be undertaken in parallel with the changes that occur in the life-cycles of their residents. It is suggested that an exploration of the interaction of these factors will open a broad new research agenda for suburban history as a subfield of urban history.

Our classic picture of suburbanization is typified in the work of Dyos' 1961 *Victorian Suburb* and in Kenneth Jackson's sweeping account of 1985, *Crabgrass Frontier.*[1] Dyos, Sam Bass Warner and Jackson detailed the steps by which suburbs were built and did important work in rescuing the suburb from historical oblivion.[2] Following this founding scholarship, a wave of revisionism sought to demonstrate the significant diversity of suburban forms, in an attempt to refute the classic picture of the bourgeois enclave established by Engels. This revisionism has achieved its purpose, by showing the vast diversity of urban settlement types, the

---

1 H.J. Dyos, *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell* (Leicester, 1961); K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1985).

2 S. Bass Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870–1900* (Cambridge, 1962).

various stages of their production and the contested nature of the suburban myth. Issues of period and diversity, covering themes including race, ethnicity,[3] class and industry, have now been documented to satisfaction by many authors.[4] For example, Dolores Hayden has proposed a perfectly reasonable chronology for periodizing newly built suburbs in the USA: 'borderlands' (starting about 1820); picturesque enclaves (1850); streetcar buildouts (1870); mail-order and self-built suburbs (1900); mass-produced 'sitcom' suburbs (1940); edge nodes (1960) and rural fringes (1980).[5]

These findings of diversity and of periodization are highly valuable. They justify the assertion that the field and the social reality that it seeks to understand have reached a mutual state of maturity. It is not at all clear, however, that the current wave of revisionism in suburban studies has transcended the limitations of the dichotomies it seeks to refute. This article is an attempt to escape from what could potentially become a congealing account, by framing a new agenda for studying suburbs. We seek to turn (sub)urban history on its side, as it were, and examine it longitudinally. With very few exceptions, the field of suburban studies has ignored the question of what happens to a suburban seedbed after it has been planted:

[3] African-American suburbs have been explored in A. Wiese, *Places of their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2004). M. Clapson's *Suburban Century, Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA* (Oxford, 2003) includes a chapter on Jewish and Asian suburbanization. E. Diamond has examined suburban Jewish Orthodox lifestyles in *And I Will Dwell in their Midst: Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* (Chapel Hill, 2000) and in 'The Kosher lifestyle, religious consumerism and suburban Orthodox Jews', *Journal of Urban History*, 28, 4 (2002), 488–505.

[4] A great deal of both the classic and the revisionist scholarship has now been collected in B. Nicolaides and A. Wiese, *The Suburb Reader* (London, 2006). Important titles include the following: A.M. Edwards, *The Design of Suburbia: A Critical Study in Environmental History* (London, 1981); T. Gardner, 'The slow wave: the changing residential status of cities and suburbs in the United States, 1850–1940', *Journal of Urban History*, 27, 3 (2001), 293–312; P.H. Mattingly, *Suburban Landscapes: Culture and Politics in a New York Metropolitan Community* (Baltimore, 2001); R. Baxandall and E. Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York, 2000); J. Borchert, 'Cities in the suburbs: heterogeneous communities on the US urban fringe, 1920–60', *Urban History*, 23, 2 (1996), 211–27; L. McCann, 'Suburbs of desire: the suburban landscape of Canadian cities, c. 1900–1950', in R. Harris and P. J. Larkham (eds.), *Changing Suburbs* (London, 1999), 111–45; B. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago, 2002); R. Lewis 'Running rings around the city: North American industrial suburbs, 1850–1950', in Harris and Larkham (eds.), *Changing Suburbs*, 146–67; A. Wiese, 'Suburbia: middle class to the last?', *Journal of Urban History*, 23, 6 (1997), 750–8; R. Harris, *Unplanned Suburbs: Toronto's American Tragedy, 1900 to 1950* (Baltimore, 1996); O. Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880–1920* (Chicago, 2000).

[5] D. Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (New York, 2003). Each stage to some extent grew out of the unsatisfactoriness or contradictions of the one before, and the last three stages in particular have depended on public subsidies, most notably the home mortgage interest deduction. It is worth noting that the US Technical Bulletin for the National Register of Historic Places (National Park Service) on Evaluating Suburbs as Historic Landscapes attempts a chronologically based typology (see the website at http://www.cr.nps.gov/NR/publications/bulletins/suburbs/index.htm, accessed 1 Jul. 2004).

after it ceases to occupy the leading edge of a metropolis, once it no longer stands as the historically typical suburban form.[6]

A most fruitful area of research in urban historical geography lies in the study of what happened to specific suburbs after they were originally planted, throughout their own life-cycles of repopulation, generational change and fluctuation with the life-cycles of individuals who inhabit these places. Focusing on nineteenth- and twentieth-century suburbs in Britain, Ireland, Canada, the USA and, to a lesser extent, Australia and New Zealand, the central contention is that the subfield is in need of a fresh direction in order to avoid the law of diminishing returns. It is proposed to shift the focus from suburbs at the point of their initial founding on the periphery, to an intensive study of their ongoing transformations and reinventions long after they have been absorbed into their larger metropolitan regions.

The catalogues, typologies and taxonomies of suburbs and suburbia are quite robust at this stage. Little more can be gained by returning again and again to the new suburban fringe. Considered proportionally, the vast majority of suburbs created since the 1850s have been inhabited far longer as old suburbs than as new ones. Many, perhaps most, of these have long ago ceased to define the outer periphery of their respective metropolises. Suburban historians have developed a rich body of empirical findings and analytical tools. These can now turn the greatest profit through reinvestment in the built fabric of the ageing suburbs in transition.

Definitions

What is it that suburban historians study? What once seemed obvious has recently become more confusing, as historians have challenged the early assumptions about what constituted a 'suburb'. Accordingly, a few definitional remarks are in order. The word 'Suburb' appeared only once in English before Chaucer's treatment in the *Canterbury Tales* (1386). Chaucer's was a dark account that was to endure for centuries: 'Where dwelle ye, if it to telle be?/ In the suburbes of a toun, quod he,/ Lurkynge in hernes and in lanes blynde,/ Wheras this robbours and thise theves by kynde/ Holden hir pryvee fereful residence,/ As they that dar nat shewen hir presence.'[7] 'There's a trim rabble let in', Shakespeare wrote in 1613, 'are

---

[6] A rare exception is Mattingly's (2001) thick history of Leonia, New York, from the eighteenth century through the present, conceived not merely a place history (of which there are many), but as a study of a genuine 'suburb' as typified by suburban scholarship, in which idiom Mattingly writes. Another is Z.L. Miller's *Visions of Place: The City, Neighborhoods, Suburbs, and Cincinnati's Clifton, 1850–2000* (Columbus, OH, 2001) which explores changes in the social, physical, civic and political structure of Clifton, as well as providing a policy analysis of current and future prospects for the neighbourhood. C.A. O'Connor's study of New York's Scarsdale in *A Sort of Utopia: Scarsdale, 1891–1981* (New York, 1983) also utilizes a scholarly longitudinal approach which charts the factors which led to the emergence of Scarsdale as a preferred residential area and those which have maintained its status as a desirable place to live.

[7] G. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript with Variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript*, ed. P.G. Ruggiers (Norman, OK, 1979), Tale 48, The

all these your faithfull friends o' th' Suburbs?'[8] Such negative assessments probably go all the way back to the Latin origins of the term, composed of the prefix 'sub-' meaning 'under, close to, up to, towards' and 'urbs' or city. Early suburbs were those parts of urban areas lying beyond the physical limits of the city, usually outside the city walls, where the unpleasant, polluting and dangerous trades were concentrated, along with the under-classes and outcasts who could not afford the privilege and safety of living within the city itself.

The long-standing (largely) negative connotation of suburbs was rapidly reversed in the early nineteenth century, as the newly emergent English middle classes began to seek residences removed from the environmental nuisances that they themselves had brought into being. Friedrich Engels (1845) was one of the first to articulate the features of these new suburbs. He highlighted the phenomenon of residential segregation and suburbanization in Manchester, describing the central commercial district of offices and warehouses as being 'lonely and deserted at night', the working people's quarters 'stretching like a girdle . . . around the commercial district' and the upper and middle bourgeoisie, living beyond this girdle: 'the middle bourgeoisie in regularly laid out streets . . . the upper bourgeoisie in remoter villas with gardens . . . in free, wholesome country air, in fine, comfortable homes, passed once every half or quarter hour by omnibuses going into the city'.[9]

Thus, while the desirability of country living began filtering down from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, and ultimately to the working classes, it is important to recognize the continuation of the process whereby certain unattractive functions, including industrial activities, were relegated to the city's edge (impelled by cheaper ground rent). Definitions must incorporate the persistence of the previous notions of suburbs, those stretching back to the medieval period.

Since Engels, definitions of suburbs have expanded exponentially. Harris and Larkham have undertaken a detailed comparative view of suburban definitions. They also point to a key difficulty: that the term often seems formless, with suburbs characterized along more than one dimension for most people. They highlight five dimensions that, to varying degrees, have been commonly emphasized in different countries: peripheral location in relation to a dominant urban centre; a partly (or wholly) residential character; low densities, often associated with decentralized patterns of settlement and high levels of owner-occupation;

Canon Yeoman's Prologue, lines 103–8. In modern English: 'Where do you dwell, if you may tell me? / Within the suburbs of a town, said he / Lurking in corners and alleys blind / Wherein these thieves and robbers every kind / have all their privy fearful residence / As those who dare not show men their presence' from full text online: www.canterburytales.org (23 Jun. 2004). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earlier occurrence was Wyclif, *Works*, *c.* 1380, six years before *The Canterbury Tales*.

[8] Henry VIII V. iv. 76.
[9] F. Engels, 'The great towns', in R.T. LeGates and F. Stout (eds.), *The City Reader* (London, 1996), 49.

a distinctive culture, or way of life; separate community identities, often embodied in local governments.[10]

Building on Harris and Larkham, the following key definitional variables are used: *Peripheral location* (at least initially, the suburb is located at the edge of the urban core); *Relationship to urban core* (functional dependence, sometimes with political independence); *Relationship to the countryside* (particularly in the nineteenth century, suburbanization was linked to the Romantic/Picturesque Movement and aspirations of country living); *Density* (relative to the urban core); *Housing type* (most commonly single-family dwellings with gardens); *Social (class, race, ethnic) segregation*; *Transportation* (commuting relationship to core); *Cultural formations* (utopian ideal 'middle landscape' and private romantic paradise versus dystopian nature-devouring 'sprawl', vacuous aesthetic wasteland, anti-intellectual, intolerant, etc.).[11]

Influenced by Joel Garreau's concept of 'Edge Cities', and Robert Fishman's 'Technoburbs', many have been led to believe that suburbia has taken on new forms. But these new clusters of commercial and residential development have all experienced the same fate as the classic suburbs: they have been swallowed up by the greater metropolitan development. In retrospect, each is part of a variegated polycentric metropolitan complex.[12] Indeed, it is suggested that a 'retrospective' orientation toward suburban history is now justified because the landscapes of capital, residence and politics have been flattening-out for many decades. It may no longer make sense to look at urbanization as divided between the kind that takes place centrally and that which is peripheral.[13] In a special 1997 issue of *Landscape*

[10] Harris and Larkham (eds.), *Changing Suburbs*, 8–14.

[11] Throughout, it is important to avoid confusion between the noun 'suburb', which is the denotative, or objective location and built form, on the one hand, and the culturally connotative noun 'suburbia', which refers to the way(s) of life of the people living in suburbs, portrayed as an identifiable group, community or class in society: 'suburbanites'.

[12] J. Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York, 1991); R. Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York, 1987); J.C. Teaford, *Post-Suburbia: Government and Politics in the Edge Cities* (Baltimore, 1996). The spread of automobility and electronic communications networks have further vitiated the core–periphery relationship between work places and domestic places. Just as department stores succumbed to regional shopping malls, the latter are facing steep competition from online shopping and an endless landscape of low-density outlets and mini- or strip-malls, whose lessees are usually transnational chain corporations.

[13] In *The New Urban Sociology* (New York, 1999), M. Gottdiener and R. Hutchison argue that the distinction usually made between city and suburb (which often is meant to stand for urban versus suburban) is misleading, not very accurate and probably counter-productive. They argue for the reintroduction and use of 'metropolitan' rather than urban, suburban and the like. The Edge City and technoburban developments are most pronounced in North America, but even in England, where greenbelt restrictions are an important constraint on further development, the tendencies towards sprawl are evident. Indeed, Bruegmann, in *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago, 2005), has argued that sprawl is inherent to urbanisation and that, despite planning stringent regulations, increasing affluence in cities across Europe in recent decades has led to a quickening of suburban and exurban development, a sharp rise in car ownership and a proliferation of single-family houses and suburban shopping centres.

and Urban Planning, for example, the increasingly international nature of dispersal and decentralization was evident, the editors pointing to 'this global transformation of cities into the dispersed urban networks for which no one has coined a fully descriptive term'.[14] At the very least, the 'process' of suburbanization has proceeded for so long, in so many places, that very nearly all of the possible types are in view.

Established knowledge

The subfield of suburban history has established a great deal of reliable knowledge, which, it is suggested, can be sorted into three broadly 'proven' features of the historical suburban reality. These three features can also be seen as the mature lines of investigation and analysis by the 'leading edge' paradigm. First, the considerable diversity within and among suburbs is accepted. Second, the distinction between city and suburb is questioned. Third, the 'suburban myth' is defined and questioned.

First, suburbs have been amazingly diverse. The stereotype of an affluent, homogeneous-white, politically conservative, consumerist and conformist settlement is simply false. Numerous North American studies have now shown that suburbs were not even largely the preserve of the middle class. As early as 1943, Chauncy Harris mapped five types of suburbs: industrial fringe; industrial; complex; dormitory; and mining and industry.[15]

Richard Harris and Robert Lewis show that manufacturing and office/retail location were dispersed to suburbs very early – commonly in the 1920s. Their essay is very convincing in overturning the North American stereotype of affluent, homogeneous, residential and politically independent suburbs.[16] It is neatly complemented by a growing list of monographs demonstrating that immigrants, non-whites and workers all established suburbs during the period. Possibly the most dramatic is the widely cited study by Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, of blue-collar South Gate, Los Angeles County, California.[17] Indeed, the New York-based journal *International Labor and Working-Class History* devoted its Fall 2003 issue to 'Workers, suburbs and labor geography', with papers

---

[14] M.A. Stern and W.M. Marsh, 'Editors' introduction. The decentred city: edge cities and the expanding metropolis', *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 36 (1997), 245. R. Freestone's article in this issue, 'New suburban centers: an Australian perspective', 247–57, points out that while suburban 'edge cities' are an international phenomenon, they assume culturally specific forms. His case study of North Ryde in the Sydney metropolitan area is used to highlight differences between the Australian and United States edge-city environments. That the articles are sourced from Canada, Germany, Britain and Australia in addition to the United States is further testimony to the widespread transformation of urban forms.

[15] C.D. Harris, 'Suburbs', *American Journal of Sociology*, 49, 1 (1943), 1–13.

[16] R. Harris and R. Lewis, 'The geography of North American cities and suburbs, 1900–1950: a new synthesis', *Journal of Urban History*, 27, 3 (2001), 262–92.

[17] Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*. See also R. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ, 2003).

considering the suburban working class in such diverse locations as New York, Mexico City, Istanbul, Vienna and Ireland.[18] Todd Gardner presents convincing statistical evidence that as late as 1940 the economic status of central-city residents was higher than that of suburbanites.[19] This is extremely valuable knowledge, showing that as late as 1940 the affluent suburb stereotype so common in North America was only valid for the minority of suburbanites.[20]

In the UK, where the suburb in its modern form was first created and where Dyos founded the modern suburban history with his seminal study of Camberwell, the mythology of the suburbs is somewhat different.[21] There is no definitional emphasis on political independence, but the expectation of uniformity within suburbs, generally stereotyped as middle-class residential enclaves, does have similarities with the North American myth.[22] Nor has there been quite the same rush towards reinterpretation, perhaps because the nature of contemporary urbanism and the perception of its problems have been rather different to those pertaining in the USA. One of the key differences between the suburban experiences of North American and Britain and Ireland, indeed, has been the contribution of public housing to suburban diversity. In particular, there is increased recognition in the literature of the importance of suburban 'council estates', usually built in response to the recognized need for slum clearance after World War I and catering for the working classes, in some cases also promoting home ownership.[23] Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the heavily working-class housing estates built by local

---

[18] J.B. Freeman, 'Workers, suburbs, and labor geography: introduction', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 64 (2003), 3–7.

[19] Gardner, 'The slow wave'.

[20] Richard Harris' exploration of Canadian suburbs in the twentieth century has argued that many suburbs were settled by workers before World War I and that social exclusivity of suburbs increased after the post-war boom (*Creeping Conformity: How Canada became Suburban, 1900–1960*, Themes in Canadian History, 7 (Buffalo, NY, 2004)). In Australia too, the suburban working class had emerged before World War II, although in the early post-war period the state financed the erection and sale of inexpensive houses on what were to become working-class estates (see T. Dingle, '"Gloria Soame": the spread of suburbia in post-war Australia', in Harris and Larkham (eds.), *Changing Suburbs*, 187–201).

[21] For a detailed exploration of the suburban myths pertaining in North America, Britain and Australia, see Richard Harris and Peter J. Larkham, 'Suburban foundation, form and function', in *Changing Suburbs*, 6–8.

[22] Nevertheless, there has perhaps been a greater recognition of alternative suburban forms in the nomenclature sometimes used in European cities specifically to define working-class suburbs and railway suburbs as 'inner city suburbs'.

[23] The extensive construction of suburban housing estates for workers by local councils in the 1920s is outlined by M. Swenarton in *Homes Fit for Heroes: The Politics and Architecture of Early State Housing in Britain* (London, 1981), while in *Working-Class Housing in England between the Wars, the Becontree Estate* (Oxford, 1997) A. Olechnowicz explores London County Council's Becontree Estate which was the largest public housing scheme ever undertaken in Britain, and, at the time of its planning, in the world. A. Ravetz has examined the twentieth-century council house experience in *Council Housing and Culture, the History of a Social Experiment* (London, 2001). For Ireland, see R. McManus, 'Blue collars, "red forts", and green fields: working-class housing in Ireland in the twentieth century', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 64 (2003), 38–54. M. Clapson's *Invincible Green Suburbs,*

authorities in Britain and Ireland, although suburban in location, were generally not viewed as being as desirable or as 'suburban' in character as their privately developed counterparts.[24] There has been considerable interest in the built form, in individual case studies and in the design aspects of suburbia among British researchers.[25] The recent City of Villages research in London shows that there is no single issue or even a concise set of typologies for suburbs.[26] Rather, suburbs encompass 'a range of issues of infinite variety. Some suburbs have problems of success; others have problems of failure. All have issues of adaptation.'[27] Nevertheless, as Ward has suggested, 'for much of the twentieth century the great mass of suburbia was taken for granted', quietly fulfilling a major role in the provision of homes and space for generations.[28]

It could, perhaps, be argued that some of the recent research has actually obscured more than it has revealed. For example, Borchert comments that 'scholars have long relied on definitions and suburban "types" that understate the complexity of period suburbs'.[29] Classificatory schemes based on transportation systems or function may obscure as much as they reveal. Now that the trend in scholarship is to focus on working-class or ethnic suburbs, he argues that there is a tendency to reinforce the image that any diversity was largely *between* rather than *within* individual suburbs. Further, there is a tendency to ignore developments in suburban communities after their initial formation.

Secondly, research has questioned the validity of the city–suburb distinction. The synthesis by Harris and Lewis claims that 'in terms of employment and social composition . . . differences between cities and

Brave New Towns: Social Change and Urban Dispersal in Postwar England (Manchester, 1998) focuses on centrally planned suburbanization for the working classes after World War II.

24 Some retain their former stigmatization when sold off, continuing to be referred to as 'former council housing estates', although in the Irish experience many older local authority housing estates have become highly desirable and command high prices.

25 Whitehand and Carr's recent work is prominent in the first area (this includes their monograph and a series of papers in *Urban History*); a range of case studies can be found in F.M.L. Thompson, ed., *The Rise of Suburbia* (Leicester, 1982), while design aspects are included in a number of works including Edwards, *The Design of Suburbia*; P. Oliver, I. Davis and I. Bentley, *Dunroamin: The Suburban Semi and its Enemies* (London, 1994); and P. Newby and M. Turner, 'British suburban taste, 1880–1939', in Harris and Larkham (eds.), *Changing Suburbs*, 32–55.

26 Greater London Authority, *A City of Villages: Promoting a Sustainable Future for London's Suburbs, SDS Technical Report 11* (London, 2002).

27 P. Clark, 'Demythologising the suburbs', *Town and Country Planning*, 72, 1 (2003), 10. One outcome of the *City of Villages* research has been the modification of the Lord Mayor's London Plan, published in June 2002, to give greater recognition to the role and potential of the suburbs.

28 C. Ward, 'Prophet in the suburbs', *Town and Country Planning*, 72, 4 (2003), 116. This claim seems to hold true for Irish suburbs also, as reflected in the dearth of published academic research on their evolution and current status. Relatively recently, the Department of Sociology at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, has established a research cluster which incorporates suburban studies, and a project entitled 'New urban living: an investigation of civic and social life in the suburbs' is currently underway.

29 Borchert, 'Cities in the suburbs', 226.

suburbs as a whole were quite minor, and were dwarfed by variations within the city and among the suburbs'.[30] Harris and Lewis assemble their argument according to four major variables: the urban economy including manufacturing, offices and retailing; social geographic patterns including residential patterns, jobs, transportation, journey-to-work and the home as a place-dependent worksite; land development and house building; and political fragmentation. In each of these areas, the authors demonstrate that characteristics attributed to either central cities or to suburbs were widely found in both locations. These arguments can be linked as well to what Pastor describes as the 'new regionalism', whereby researchers and policy makers argue for a bridging of city and suburb interests under a common regional agenda by emphasizing the commonalities of central cities and their suburbs.[31]

Missing from the articles in the special issue (2001) on North American suburbs in the *Journal of Urban History* is the question of a single suburban place changing character over time. Harris and Lewis make their case mostly by observing certain locations at certain points in time, and compile long lists from various times. Against the stereotype that suburbs were always WASP havens, they point to the fact that Brooklyn and the Bronx were once suburban havens for immigrant Jews. But they then move on to other counter-examples. In recounting the poly-nucleation of manufacturing in Chicago and LA, they point to early firm locational decisions that placed factories outside of the central cities and created working-class suburbs around those nuclei. They leave the story of those places/times and move to others.

Industrial suburbs, however, later became engulfed in the dense residential spread of the city. Those former suburbs and many like them later seemed to be part of the central city for another wave of suburban planting and development. The same is true for the Bronx, now a symbol of central-city slums, or even Brooklyn. This evidence of diversity is welcome, but it needs to be re-embedded in historical place-time. Lewis begins to do this with his exploration of four nineteenth-century industrial suburbs in Montreal and Chicago, which were seen, by the mid-twentieth century, as central-city slums.[32] He shows how these districts, originally at the urban fringe, became engulfed by the city and how the representation of these places was also resituated in the process.

Thirdly, the 'suburban myth' has been defined and questioned. The dystopian account of American suburbs which has roots, as has been

[30] Harris and Lewis, 'The geography of North American cities and suburbs', 284.

[31] M. Pastor, 'Looking for regionalism in all the wrong places, demography, geography and community in Los Angeles county', *Urban Affairs Review*, 36, 6 (2001), 747–82; recent planning debates in Britain have similarly recognized the need for renewal and regeneration to be targeted at suburbs as well as in central city areas (see Clark, 'Demythologising the suburbs').

[32] R. Lewis, 'The industrial suburb is dead, long live the industrial slum: suburbs and slums in Chicago and Montreal, 1850–1950', *Planning Perspectives*, 17 (2002), 123–44.

shown, running all the way to Chaucer was permanently established by Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1922).[33] Thirty years previously, Grossmith's *Diary of a Nobody* (1892) chronicled the details of Mr Pooter's small-minded but essentially decent English suburban life.[34] Both were more about middle-class society than about the suburbs *per se*, and one of the challenges for academics is to attempt to disentangle this concatenation of suburb and middle-class society ('suburbia').[35] Donaldson was one of those who debunked the homogeneous 'vast wasteland of conformity' charge that grew up in the sociology of 1950s North America,[36] while Thorns did similar work in relation to the British suburb.[37] Despite such challenges, works such as Alan A. Jackson's *The Middle Classes* continue to link middle-class society to life in English middle-class suburbs.[38]

Nevertheless, not everyone has been convinced by this new scholarship. Mary Corbin Sies acknowledges the sweeping nature of recent empirical and taxonomic revisioning, but argues that the cultural image of a semi-rural setting with detached homes and a bourgeois lifestyle has been one that, even if not at all typical, has nevertheless driven much of US urban development for 130 years or so.[39] She also sees a basic element of centre-periphery in the overall pattern of US urban development, which needs to be retained in some form in future paradigms. Certainly, recent work in cultural studies emphasizes the continued importance of the representation of the (largely) US suburb in movies and on television, both conforming to pre-existing conceptions of the suburb and also generating and reinforcing those conceptions through the media's understanding of what audiences believe the reality to be.[40] Such studies have highlighted

[33] S. Lewis, *Babbitt* (London, 1922).

[34] G. Grossmith and W. Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (Harmondsworth, 1995).

[35] Harris and Larkham, 'Suburban foundation, form and function', 5, have illustrated how the term suburb has 'not always carried the associations of idyllic, quasi-rural and highly private life-style that are presently current in much of the English-speaking urban tradition'. Instead, they outline its parabolic trajectory, ascending the social hierarchy from low to high, and then falling.

[36] S. Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth* (New York, 1969), 2. Other influential early challenges were made by B. Berger (*Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto-Workers in Suburbia* (Berkeley, 1960)) and H. Gans (*The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York, 1967)), showing that certain elements of the myth were erroneous.

[37] D.C. Thorns, *Suburbia* (London, 1972). Thorns argued that the popular image of the suburb in Britain 'more correctly should be seen as a middle-class style of living rather than as a suburban style in that it is based upon occupational, educational and status criteria as much if not more than upon those of residence' (from 'Suburbs: myth or reality', in A. Blowers, C. Brook, P. Dunleavy and L. McDowell (eds.), *Urban Change and Conflict* (London, 1981), 100). More recently, Thorns has considered New Zealand's suburbs in works including *Fragmenting Societies? A Comparative Analysis of Regional and Urban Development* (London, 1992).

[38] A.A. Jackson, *The Middle Classes, 1900–50* (Nairn, 1992).

[39] M. Corbin Sies, 'North American suburbs, 1880–1950: cultural and social reconsiderations', *Journal of Urban History*, 27, 3 (2001), 313–46.

[40] See D. Muzzio and T. Halper, 'Pleasantville? The suburb and its representation in American movies', *Urban Affairs Review*, 37, 4 (2002), 543–74; L. Spigel (ed.), *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC, 2001).

many assumptions about class, race and gender that permeate media images of the suburbs and continue to influence popular perceptions of suburban form and lifestyles. They frequently underline the fact that the media has not always reflected positive stereotypes but often highlights dystopian elements, a point made throughout Beuka's *Suburbianation* and many of the essays in *Visions of Suburbia* and *Expanding Suburbia.*[41] Similarly, in her work on the twentieth-century suburban novel, Jurca remarks upon

the tendency in twentieth-century literary treatments of the American suburb to convert the rights and privileges of living there into spiritual, cultural, and political problems of displacement, in which being white and middle class is imagined to have as much or more to do with subjugation as with social dominance.[42]

Beuka's final chapter highlights the tendency for suburban imagery to remain largely static, despite the evident changing nature of suburbs. However, it is also suggested that a new phase in suburban representation may have begun.

Now that scholars have reached such widespread agreement, at least on these three broad dimensions, the time is ripe for a fresh approach.

Three related proposals for the future study of suburbs

It is proposed that future research on the historical development of suburbs should shift from an emphasis on the three themes outlined in the previous section, toward a research agenda organized around the following three approaches: embeddedness: the inscription of history in landscape; urban morphologies: modifying the built and social fabric; interactive ecology: the re-consumption and reproduction of suburban spaces.

These three approaches proceed from what seems to be a very sensible assumption: that every suburb, once planted, eventually evolves in a way that incorporates both continuity and change, in terms of the built and social fabric. Generations of families go through their life-cycles in these places; successions of socio-economic or race-ethnic groups lay claim to these places; residents enacting these life-cycles tear down and rebuild these places. Their history extends far beyond the history of their founding, and is constituted in the layers produced during each cycle.

---

[41] R. Beuka, *Suburbianation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth Century American Film and Fiction* (New York, 2004); R. Silverstone, *Visions of Suburbia* (London, 1997). The interdisciplinary essays in R. Webster (ed.), *Expanding Suburbia* (Oxford, 2001), also consider a range of representations of suburban life from the late nineteenth century to the present day, including fiction, film and popular music, drawn from Britain, America and Australia. They also explore and challenge traditional views of suburbia, recognizing that, rather than a location of conformity and stereotypicality, it can be viewed as a site of social conflict, division and ambiguity as well as a source of significant creativity across a range of cultural texts.

[42] C. Jurca, *White Diaspora, the Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton, 2001), 3.

Embeddedness: the inscription of history in landscape

The history of suburbs should turn its eyes downward, to the points on the ground that have accumulated so much history since a given suburb was first planted. Anthony Giddens offered one important framework in his *Constitution of Society*, showing how socio-cultural institutions are attached to place, and how the evolution of institutions 'takes place' in a process he calls 'structuration'.[43] There are many theoretical models now, arising mainly from cultural geographers, that can be deployed to study the historical processes of place-making.[44]

Urban scholars have not been oblivious to this phenomenon, of course. Whitehand and Larkham call for studies of the urban landscape, so that it is possible to 'understand the cyclical processes of adaptation and renewal'.[45] In his 1994 discussion of development cycles, Whitehand reminds us that 'Each society leaves its mark on the landscape, creating forms that reflect the aspirations and problems of its day. Urban landscapes are thus an important form of accumulated experience . . . They are a physical record of past societies, and of our own, waiting to be read.'[46] Our point is that suburban history needs to take these lessons much more seriously. Too often our colleagues have chased the leading edge of the wave of (sub)urban development. Rather, it is necessary to sort through the concrete layers sedimented, as it were, in each particular once-upon-a-suburb (say, those originally built in the 1830s, 1870s, 1920s, 1950s or 1990s). As Conzen saw it, the townscape is 'a kind of palimpsest on which the features contributed by any particular period may have been partly or wholly obliterated by those of a later one'.[47]

There is, of course, an extensive literature on neighbourhood change, which has generally been led by urban economists and real estate interests, as well as sociologists. Two of the earliest classic accounts were Homer Hoyt's 1939 exploration for the US Federal Housing Administration, which considered the impact of high value land use on the structure of cities and Walter Firey's 1947 study, which examined the social and cultural values that influenced land use in central Boston.[48] More recently, George

---

[43] A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley, CA, 1986), 1–40.

[44] For example, Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Evidence of Experience* (Minneapolis, 2001).

[45] J.W.R. Whitehand and P.J. Larkham (eds.), *Urban Landscapes: International Perspectives* (London, 1992).

[46] J.W.R. Whitehand, 'Development cycles and urban landscapes', *Geography*, 79 (1994), 5.

[47] M.R.G. Conzen, 'The use of town plans in the study of urban history', in H.J. Dyos (ed.), *The Study of Urban History* (London, 1968), 116.

[48] H. Hoyt, *The Structure and Growth of Residential Neighborhoods in American Cities* (Washington, 1939). Based on an analysis of housing rental and value data in over 200 US cities in the 1930s, this work suggested that residential patterns developed through the growth of high-rent sectors which expanded outwards from the central business district along major routeways (i.e. the sectoral model of urban land use). W. Firey, *Land Use in Central Boston* (Cambridge, MA, 1947).

Galster's work has used quantitative analysis to examine neighbourhood change in terms of its policy implications.[49] While such studies look at social and physical aspects of small-area change, they tend not to have a specifically suburban focus or to recognize the changing meanings of such places.

It is certainly the case that suburbs and the meanings invested in them will change over time. Westwood, a section of Los Angeles, was laid out in the 1920s as suburban, its lots large enough for a garden on all sides, its streets lined with tall trees. It was once on the fringe, so the University of California put its second great campus, after the original one at Berkeley, on its inexpensive land. Most residential streets remain as low density as they were in the 1920s, but the area is now riven by the Wilshire Corridor, sprouting 30-storey apartment and condominium towers for more than a mile, producing the busiest intersection in the United States, where the seven lanes of Wilshire and five of Sepulveda combine to average 300,000 vehicles per day. The once-small-townish CBD, specializing in striking Art Deco movie houses, is now a real downtown centre, so that the once-peripheral settlement has grown its own navel. Lewis has observed just this process of reorientation and changed meanings in another context:

Each new growth cycle deposited new suburban areas and, in the process, transformed the meaning of what was central and what was suburb. Old districts such as Saint-Henri and Sainte-Cunegonde were resituated and, in effect, made central compared to the new ones fifteen to thirty miles out from the city core. No longer considered to be suburban or fringe, they were now central city.[50]

The point is simply that the research into a suburban place should not end here, once the former peripheral place has been re-designated as 'central city'.

Urban morphologies: modifying the built and social fabric

There are several ways to conceive of modifications in the built and social fabric of cities and suburbs. Some focus on the built form while others focus on the social form. Traditionally within urban studies, 'morphology' has been taken to refer to changes in the built fabric. In sociology, however, Durkheim founded the field of 'social morphology', as the study of variant configurations of social life. To reflect the contention that these two

---

[49] For example, in R.G. Quercia and G. Galster, 'Threshold effects and neighborhood change', *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 20, 2 (2000), 146–62, the authors examine empirical evidence on changing neighbourhood attributes such as racial group composition, income group composition, social and economic conditions and housing investment. The identification of such thresholds is seen as offering guidance to planners for the spatial targeting of reinvestments to neighbourhoods which may be approaching critical thresholds.

[50] Lewis, 'The industrial suburb is dead', 131.

elements should both be included, the plural form, 'urban morphologies', is used. Here the two trends in research are reviewed, and then their conjoint analysis is advocated in the third thesis.

The first and most common study of urban morphology is to focus on successive forms of construction. Whitehand and Carr, for instance, consider the timing of the creation of the physical form of the British inter-war suburb in terms of a morphological period. In particular, they consider the transition from Edwardian to inter-war styles and discuss the importance of World War I and associated changes in bringing about new suburban forms.[51]

Another way to conceptualize these changes to the built form is in terms of the actions of the occupants modifying and upgrading their dwellings, with a net effect of dramatic change at intervals of perhaps 20–30 years. Again Whitehand and Carr have explored this in a British context, while Kelly's work on Levittown refers to similar processes in the USA. She shows that the Levittowners were not just consumers of a finished product but actively reshaped their environment to create a new community of individualized homes, a process which she deems so important that she describes the homeowner as 'co-producer' of the domestic environment.[52] Interestingly, in terms of this discussion, she also relates the remodelling to changing phases in the life-cycle of the residents and to changing lifestyles associated with this family cycle. The arrival of new babies brought with it the conversion of attics to bedrooms, while adolescents were given their own spaces with the addition of 'rumpus rooms'. Kelly shows that by the 1970s and 1980s, a generation or so after the initial development, social and economic change in Levittown was being reflected in the built environment. This included the provision of separate apartments (what in the UK are termed 'granny flats' and in the USA are called 'mother-in-law units') within homes for ageing parents, the maintenance of bedrooms for unemployed or divorced adult children and the subdivision of houses to accommodate rental tenants.

In a study of Canadian wartime houses, Evenden has detailed structural changes, generally involving adding new space to existing dwellings.[53] While changes were constrained and shaped by local regulations, by financial ability and by fashion, the most important impetus identified has been the needs of growing families. Over a 40 year period, he illustrates the ways in which householders can be seen as 'co-producers' with the

---

[51] J.W.R. Whitehand and C.M.H. Carr, *Twentieth-Century Suburbs: A Morphological Approach* (London, 2001). Factors included the fact that building was at a standstill during war, new firms were emerging, the introduction of the Tudor Walters report and introduction of mass local authority house building, with knock-on impact on private enterprise in terms of density etc.

[52] B.M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany, 1993), 3.

[53] L.J. Evenden, 'Wartime housings as cultural landscape, national creation and personal creativity', *Urban History Review*, 25, 2 (1997), 41–52.

original builders, as the transformation process contributed to the evolving cultural landscape of the present. Tracking two specific houses, he provides a detailed case study of the changes taking place over time, using precisely dated records of building permits. For example, the construction of a basement, installation of heavy wiring for a cooking range and hot water heater, installation of a gas furnace, addition of a carport, enclosure of the carport and building a significant addition with extra bedrooms and bathroom are all noted, as are changes of ownership. In another study, this time covering the north shore of Greater Vancouver, Evenden found that the developing life-cycle of households during the child-raising years was the chief determinant of house expansions.[54] What these works show is that the remodelling of homes is related to the life-cycle of residents. In some cases, of course, remodelling is linked to social status, but particularly at the earlier stages of home ownership, it has much more to do with family needs.

Two key aspects of what might be termed 'group succession' have received considerable attention from researchers. One is the process whereby different ethnic groups move into particular areas, with much attention given to non-white settlement in the US and Canadian context.[55] The other process is class-related, as neighbourhood change is explored in terms of gentrification. One significant longitudinal study of gentrification has examined the changing residential structure of Adelaide's suburbs over a 30 year period, exemplifying the longer timeframe of study which is proposed for suburban history.[56] The paper's main focus is on the housing market, statistical change and state intervention, rather than on the suburbs themselves, which are not clearly defined. Nevertheless, the author demonstrates how data can be utilized to monitor occupational changes in small areas of cities. Over time the downgrading and subsequent improvement of certain districts is demonstrated. Interestingly, the phenomenon of social change is shown to take different forms. In one western suburb, rather than being taken over by the 'classic' gentrifier, typically seen as young professionals with third-level education, more 'marginal' gentrifiers were in evidence, namely those in clerical or sales roles. Furthermore, many young couples who grew up in these areas were

---

[54] L.J. Evenden, 'The expansion of domestic space on Vancouver's North Shore', in G.M. Robinson (ed.), *A Social Geography of Canada* (Toronto, 1991), 220–44.

[55] See T. Clark, *Blacks in Suburbs: A National Perspective* (Somerset, NJ, 1979); and R. Lake, *The New Suburbanites: Race and Housing in the Suburbs* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1981). B.K. Ray, G. Halseth and B. Johnson, 'The changing "face" of the suburbs: issues of ethnicity and residential change in suburban Vancouver', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 21, 1 (1997), 75–99, evaluates the social and physical changes brought about within the 'white' middle-class suburb of Richmond by a relatively recent arrival of Chinese immigrants. This paper also notes the suggestion that Canadian suburbs were generally more ethnically heterogeneous than their American counterparts from an early date.

[56] B. Badcock, 'Thirty years on: gentrification and class changeover in Adelaide's inner suburbs, 1966–96', *Urban Studies*, 38, 9 (2001), 1559–72.

seen to be buying back into them.[57] Clearly people who grew up in certain suburbs identify with these particular places and often wish to return to those communities.

Badcock also finds an ethnic dimension in his study of Adelaide. As upwardly mobile Australian-born residents moved out of the western inner suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, these areas initially underwent population decline before experiencing an influx of foreign-born industrial workers during the 1960s and 1970s, mostly from southern Europe. Over time these new residents bought their homes from the landlords and carried out improvements to their dwellings. By the late 1980s, a property boom across urban Australia, combined with the particular attractions of living relatively close to the centre, brought about a further change. The now elderly migrants gradually began to sell their homes to a new generation of gentrifiers who often carried out considerable modifications to their houses. Thus the suburban evolution of Adelaide since World War II can be understood in terms of both group succession and family life-cycle, with changing ethnicity and socio-economic status of residents over time.

One of the key differences between suburbanization in North America and Europe is the lack of suburban public housing in the former location. Naturally, state or local authority intervention adds an additional layer of complexity, potentially disrupting the processes of succession and life-cycle through housing allocation policies. However, at least in the more mature local authority suburbs built in the earlier part of the twentieth century, the type of social or family cycling described above has occurred, especially where tenant-purchase schemes operated, enabling the tenants to buy their homes over time. For example, the (now) inner suburb of Marino, to the north-east of Dublin's city centre, was a working-class housing development of almost 1,400 houses built in the second half of the 1920s by the local authority, Dublin Corporation, at the edge of the then built-up area of the city. From its initiation, Marino was intended as a model 'garden suburb' heavily influenced by the work of Unwin and Parker in England, built at low densities using a range of Irish-sourced materials, reflecting the aspirations of the newly established Irish Free State in terms of providing for its workers. The houses were available to families with four or more children on a tenant purchase basis. This meant that within a few decades, the houses had passed from public to private ownership with a consequent ability for the owners to undertake changes to the built fabric.

Support for the view that ageing suburbs retain their sense of place as they evolve through new cycles is provided by the Northeast Ohio First Suburbs Consortium, an organization which argues that the older, inner suburbs have been neglected in public policy while newer, outer

---

[57] *Ibid.*, 1568.

edge suburbs have been favoured by government spending. The lakefront community of Euclid, outside Cleveland, is one such neglected 'inner ring' suburb. In the immediate post-war years, Euclid's new bungalows epitomized the American Dream for a generation, but by the 1970s this inner suburb was in decline, with deteriorating roads, housing and commercial districts.[58] The suburb and its population had aged, losing the vitality which had once been so attractive.[59] That there is a suburban life-cycle is implicit in much that has been written about these and similar suburbs in Britain also. For example, The Greater London Authority's City of Villages report explores the ways in which various inaccessible or less fashionable suburbs are running the risk of decline.[60]

Lewis' (2002) discussion of the change from industrial suburb to industrial slum explores the set of processes which generated both material and representational changes to these landscapes over the period from the mid-nineteenth to approximately the mid-twentieth century. Initial growth outside the municipal limits of Chicago and Montreal was followed within the space of two generations by political annexation, industrial and population changes and a deterioration in social and environmental conditions. While the main focus is on the factors leading to the changed perception of these former suburbs as central slums, some elements of the discussion also reflect the types of social change which we consider to be of importance.

In Bridgeport and Packingtown, both nineteenth-century industrial suburbs of Chicago, the initial residents were mostly Irish and German. There was relative stability in the ethnic structure of Bridgeport, which remained largely Irish, whereas Packingtown experienced considerable turnover, as the Irish and Germans moved further out on the city fringe from the 1880s and were replaced by eastern and southern Europeans. The original single-family housing stock was gradually either subdivided or replaced by multi-unit tenements. Although the physical and ethnic fabric of Packingtown thus changed over time, Lewis emphasizes the degree of continuity within this suburb, rather than the transience that might be expected. 'Despite ethnic succession, each new group quickly implanted strong ethnic and class institutions, and built a vibrant set of community networks. Even though inter-generational out-migration occurred, the districts retained a tight and stable core population.'[61] In 1930, for example, Packingtown's and Bridgeport's residents had lived in their neighbourhood much longer than either typical city-dwellers or the middle-class residents of adjacent Hyde Park, and were also more likely to be homeowners.

[58] B. Horstman, 'Outer belt vs. inner belt: the first suburbs', *Cincinnati Post*, 10 Oct. 2000.
[59] The need for suburban renewal is addressed by W.H. Hudnut in *Halfway to Everywhere: A Portrait of America's First-Tier Suburbs* (Washington, 2003). His work explores how residents of nine older suburbs are tackling the issue of decline.
[60] Greater London Authority, *City of Villages*.
[61] Lewis, 'The industrial suburb is dead', 137.

Interactive ecology: the re-consumption and reproduction of suburban spaces

Studies of suburbs and cities must combine the mutual interaction of socio-cultural formations and the built form. Successive groups residing in suburbs have remade those places as they settled in a given suburb, succeeding earlier settlers. But individual families age as well, and do different things with their homes and yards/gardens over the course of a 20, 30 or even 40 year occupation. Families with young children in new post-war suburbs packed with similar child-intensive homes took on an archetypal status, but the same place observed 20 and then 40 years later shows distinctly evolving uses. Suburbs of retirees/pensioners are very common, with eerily silent streets once teeming with children.[62]

A highly complex research agenda grows from these two observations, because they operate not independently but interactively. Life-cycles of families take place within the settlement cycles of groups or generations, and often within a built environment which is also undergoing an ageing process. As Dingle explains in his discussion of demographic change and suburban growth, 'At any time the outer ring of suburbs – the suburban frontier – is the city's main breeding zone and the main residential building site.' In exploring the Melbourne suburb of Waverley, Dingle takes a longitudinal approach, using census data to demonstrate patterns of change associated with population growth and building activity over the period from 1947 to 1991.[63]

The issues raised by the suburban life-cycle are familiar to those who provide services to these areas, particularly as services tend to lag behind housing. Newly built suburban homes at the edge of the built-up area are usually occupied by young couples at the family formation stage of the life-cycle. This is recognized by the builders and estate agents who frequently refer to 'starter homes'. With large numbers of children all reaching school age simultaneously, the existing rural schools, if any, cannot cope. An extreme example is the development of Tallaght, a designated 'new town' but in effect a suburb of Dublin, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The explosion in the population of school-going age ran ahead of the school building programme, so that split shifts operated (effectively two different schools operating on the same site, one morning and one afternoon) or

---

[62] Children usually leave their natal homes in North America, as demographers long observed. Where do they go and do they come back?

[63] T. Dingle, 'People and places in post-war Melbourne', in G. Davison, T. Dingle and S. O'Hanlon (eds.), *The Cream Brick Frontier: Histories of Australian Suburbia* (Monash, 1995), 30. His paper identifies two key phases of the suburban life-cycle. The first is a pioneer phase where 'families set up home as the suburb was physically assembled around them' (35), and during which time he hypothesizes a scarcity of resources and relative material privation. Dingle's second key phase occurs when the children leave home, often to become a new generation of suburban pioneers in outer suburbs. This generally results in population decline in the original suburb, a relative over-provision of public facilities and probably also fuller purses as the mortgage is likely to have been paid off and the children have left home.

the children were brought by bus to schools in Walkinstown, an older suburb closer to the centre. Walkinstown had seen its first generation of school-goers grow up and move on, so its schools which had catered for many children in the 1950s and 1960s were now suffering from falling enrolment numbers. Similarly, today the schools in Tallaght which were so over-stretched in the past are now experiencing spare capacity as the suburban population ages.

The 'baby boom' generation in the United States has had a correspondingly profound impact on the suburban fabric. A school building boom arose to accommodate the deluge of children from the 1950s to the 1970s, and then these same schools became depopulated and repurposed (often as private academies) in the 1980s and 1990s. But the impact of the baby boomers did not stop there. As this generation entered their own family-building stage of life, they warped the housing market with a spike in demand, and either re-occupied the suburbs, remodelling them to suit new tastes, or initiated 'gentrification' patterns in other parts of cities. In a fascinating paper based on interviews with older suburbanites in Melbourne, Barbara and Graeme Davison demonstrate how individuals who moved to new suburbs without roads and essential services interpret their experience within a pioneering master narrative. They also point out that, for the residents, 'house-building and home-making are part of a single undertaking'.[64] All the more reason, then, to explore both together.

How to analyse these transformations is an important question, and yet there are precedents that need to be recovered before reinventing the wheel. The concept of the suburban life-cycle was implied by the work of the factorial ecologists in the 1960s and 1970s, when the quantitative revolution in geography reached its zenith. A range of carefully selected census data, when analysed using factor analysis or principal components analysis, can be used to explore the ways in which the population of a city (and its suburbs) becomes sifted and sorted into distinct patterns. The social forces which differentiate households, in terms of social status, position in the life-cycle and sometimes additional criteria such as ethnicity, are reflected in the geographical patterning of a population. Economic status will determine a household's spending power, influence the type of neighbourhood which is sought and the accommodation which it can afford. The different types of accommodation tend to be geographically segregated with regard to tenure, price, size and neighbourhood amenities, leading to a sorting of the population.

'Factorial ecologies' can provide a useful means of investigating the character of small sub-areas within the city.[65] Many studies of the ecological

---

[64] B. Davison and G. Davison, 'Suburban pioneers', in Davison, Dingle and O'Hanlon (eds.), *The Cream Brick Frontier*, 42.

[65] Nevertheless, difficulties exist, particularly concerning the nature of the units available in census statistics. In the Dublin context, for example, the smallest available 'small area' population statistics refer to wards or district electoral divisions which have fairly large

structure of cities have been undertaken and, despite the range of different statistical packages used and variations in census data available, they always demonstrate at least two significant differentiating factors which underlie the spatial organization of neighbourhood types.[66] One factor is social class or socio-economic status. The other is family status, or the household's stage in the life-cycle (pre-child, child-rearing, child-launching, 'empty nesters', etc.). In many British and Irish cities, an identifiable 'housing factor' has also been found to be a significant basis of neighbourhood differentiation.[67] These factors can and have been mapped, and, where a series of census data is analysed, can be used to illustrate the cycling of different neighbourhoods over time.[68] Such studies, though less fashionable, clearly demonstrate the notion of a family status dimension to suburbanization. The contemporary trend has been towards an awareness that the infinitely complex mosaic of the city means that other dimensions, not identifiable by the variables fed into ecological studies, characterize its space. That does not negate the significance of their findings. Rather, it suggests that factorial ecology could be revived with a wider set of variables and set within this broader context.

This approach is termed 'interactive ecology' to signify the interactive relationship between the life-cycle of the residents who both consume and produce space, and the life-cycle of the built environment, both consumed and produced by the residents and influenced by external forces, including the suburb's changing relative location within and relationship to the metropolis. To study these transformations, the standard tools of social history, architectural history and oral histories could yield a treasure-trove of fascinating results. It is possible to trace changes in ownership through street directories, while the census of population gives regular-interval

populations, averaging over 3,500 persons in the sub-region as a whole. These therefore tend to be socially quite heterogeneous internally. See A. MacLaran, *Dublin: The Shaping of a Capital* (London, 1993), 175.

[66] D. Timms, *The Urban Mosaic: Towards a Theory of Residential Differentiation* (Cambridge, 1971).

[67] R. McManus and J. Brady, 'Recent trends in the Irish urban system with particular reference to Dublin and Cork', *Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Geographica*, 1 (1994), 31–46.

[68] In 1969, Murdie synthesized the work of a number of factorial ecologists to produce a set of three hypotheses, presenting a diagram which suggests three significant factors influencing the residential structure of cities: economic status (associated with measures of income, occupation and education, which tends to be distributed sectorally), family status (associated with fertility, type of household, labour force participation by women, which tends to be distributed concentrically) and ethnic status (which tends to form 'groupings' superimposed on the existing structure created by the previous two patterns). R.A. Murdie, 'The factorial ecology of Toronto', University of Chicago, Department of Geography Research Paper no. 116 (Chicago, 1969). In their 1979 paper, Collver and Semyonov demonstrated a method for the quantitative analysis of changes in the socio-economic status characteristics of suburban communities in Long Island, which demonstrated that a simultaneous examination of a range of dimensions of suburban differentiation would lead to a more complete understanding that was provided by any one approach, and stressing that three different variables (education, occupation and income) had different patterns of change. A. Collver and M. Semyonov, 'Suburban change and persistence', *American Sociological Review*, 44, 3 (1979), 480–6.

snapshots of the socio-economic composition of the suburb. Many variables could be compiled into maps, showing the key transformations at decadal intervals. The suburb is not an isolated entity, but intimately linked with the city from which it derived its *raison d'être.* As the city changes, so too do its suburbs. It is essential, therefore, to understand and explore the history of the suburb in a situated way, within the changing context of the metropolis.