

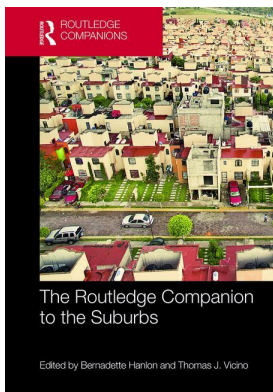
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### In what sense a post-suburban era?

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# In what sense a post-suburban era?

Nicholas A. Phelps

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## Introduction

In what sense do we live in a post-suburban world? On the one hand, a sense of a clear and distinct break between suburban and post-suburban eras is problematic, not least because of the highly relative nature of the very definition of the word “suburb.” At any number of geographical scales across what Neil Smith (1981) depicted as the see-saw of uneven development or what Lefebvre (2003) depicted as the implosion-explosion dialectic of planetary urbanization, there is of course a fundamental unity in the urbanization process. The likes of inner-city gentrification and suburbanization are linked as part of a single process involving investment, disinvestment, and reinvestment. Yet, on the other hand, there is a sense that the post-suburban is necessarily implied in the suburb itself. It is implied in the suburb as a settlement (or more correctly, perhaps, a people and their institutions) in the process of *becoming* urban – in form, in function, and in ways of life. This sense of a settlement characterized by a *process* of becoming doubtless has existed from ancient times but is, I suggest, perhaps most palpable today as we investigate the many housing forms and settlement types that make up the suburbs in an era of planetary urbanization.

In this chapter, I set out three different senses in which we might think of there being a post-suburban era followed with additional reflections on an earlier review (Phelps et al., 2010). First, I discuss ideas of a post-suburban era. Second, I discuss the sense of post-suburbia as settlement form. While there are limits to this view, questions of form nevertheless remain more important than contemporary discourse on planetary urbanization might suggest. Third, I develop the idea that post-suburbs and the processes producing them are implied in the contradictions of suburbs and processes of suburbanization. The third of these is the one I favor. This is because of the difficulties of distinguishing suburbs from post-suburbs in terms of a new era when such considerations are based on static empirical measures and the problems associated with the lack of attention to geographical or morphological variation apparent in the most abstract theoretical formulations of “planetary urbanization” (Lefebvre, 2003). My favored third sense of a post-suburban era is one implied in the modernity of state and private sector-developed residential suburbs of the Global North (and especially Anglophone countries), but here I also briefly discuss whether it has wider applications to the individual and collective aspirations to modernity implied in the self-built shanties, favelas, and kampungs through which suburbanization has

occurred across much of the Global South. That is, the emergence of a class of post-suburbs may be an ideological and political mutation of the traditional residential suburb in notably Anglo-American settings – a local, more modest and concrete manifestation of the broader politics of second modernity of which Ulrich Beck and colleagues have spoken. This perspective is not without its own limitations, but I believe it offers a tractable basis for considering and evaluating empirical evidence and can provide valuable insights into the very contradictions that lie at the heart of capitalist urbanization processes.

In the following sections, I first examine definitions of the suburb and processes of suburbanization before going on to consider the adequacy of three different senses in which we can speak of a post-suburban era. In closing, I draw some broader conclusions regarding the value of thinking about what a class of post-suburbs (alongside other settlement types) and processes of post-suburbanization can reveal about the fundamental unity of the capitalist urbanization process.

### **The suburb and suburbanization defined**

Both city and suburb are deceptive terms. They are both difficult to define precisely and are rather more a case of “we know one when we see one.” One composite definition developed recently by Harris and Larkham (1999, p. 8) provides a starting point for thinking about suburbs but also post-suburbs and processes of suburbanization and post-suburbanization. Harris and Larkham (1999, p. 8) provide a composite definition of a suburb as a settlement: 1) in a peripheral location relative to a dominant urban center; 2) partly or wholly residential in character; 3) of low-density of development; 4) with a distinctive culture or way of life; and 5) a separate community identity often embodied in a local government. The definition is a starting point as it arguably is exposed, just as definitions of the post-suburban can be, to the very process of urbanization it seeks to shed light on. The first element also forms the basis of Ekers et al. (2012, p. 407) definition of suburbanization as “the combination of non-central population and economic growth with urban spatial expansion.” However, the outward expansion of cities renders the first definition highly relative – what was once peripheral comes to be regarded as central by virtue of the ongoing urbanization process. The second ingredient of the composite definition becomes problematic when we move beyond the Anglophone world, let alone beyond the Global North.

The suburb has been an escape from the city in some societal contexts, and an approach to the city in others. Moreover, there are no easy area-based generalizations that can be made with respect to these two aspects of the suburb. Examples of the suburb as approach to and retreat from the city are both to be found within a single complex continent like Europe (Phelps and Vento, 2015). There are important commonalities between the suburbs of southern European cities and those in Latin American cities – and indeed across much of the Global South – in terms of the informality of their mode of development and their being an approach to the opportunities and services of cities.

Perhaps a lowest common denominator that might integrate discourse on the suburb is that it is, in one or more senses, less than urban. If we accept this, we might also – although this is more controversial in some regards – accept the suggestion that, by the actions of their people and institutions, these settlements are in a process of becoming more urban. This is a question that has rarely been touched on in the literature (Bourne, 1996) and remains a largely vacant research agenda (see also McManus and Ethington, 2007). That is, rather than the suburb as a category, it is the process of (post)suburbanization that needs to be considered (Ekers, Hamel and Keil, 2012).

Yet, given the sheer diversity of suburbs and the meanings attached to them, it is also likely that classification of different (post)suburban settlement types is not at all antithetical to understanding

the operation of processes – indeed in the face of such diversity, it may be a vital first cut at theoretical understanding and empirical verification.

### **The post-suburb as new era in urbanization**

The first, and perhaps most straightforward, sense of our having entered a post-suburban era in some societal contexts was outlined by Lucy and Phillips (1997) in the case of the state of Virginia in the United States and also appears present in Essex and Brown's (1997) work on Australia. Lucy and Phillips (1997, p. 260) defined the post-suburban era as a "time period which is succeeding the suburban era and which includes several spatial forms, including a sprawling exurban rural pattern, which is of much lower-density than most suburbs." More specifically still, they define this post-suburban era in terms of "inner suburban population loss and relative income decline, suburban employment increase, suburban out commuting reduction, exurban population and income increase and farmland conversion."

One set of problems with this definition stems from the fact that it is oriented primarily to situations found in Anglophone countries where the residential suburb has been a bourgeois retreat from the city (Fishman, 1987). Across much of the Global South and some parts of Europe, for example, self-built residential "suburbs" are an approach to the city by low-income populations, meaning that successively peripheral suburban developments are unlikely to have incomes that are growing faster than elsewhere across metropolitan areas. The limits of this definition are also reached when one recognizes the "temporal disparity" that exists not only within the Global North but also between the Global North and Global South: the rising average income levels and urban transitions that are seen to drive suburbanization as a global residential preference (Bruegmann, 2006) and process have taken place at different times and have yet to happen in many other instances.

A second problem is that this definition of a post-suburban era is also entirely relative within any given national context let alone when considering the divergent trajectories of nations noted earlier. Whether and when a particular settlement or jurisdiction is post-suburban depends entirely on where it is located relative to a historic city. Or, as a process, it is dependent on some minimal extension of cities. To put this slightly differently, and returning to our definition of a suburb outlined above, suburbs can be rendered invisible by the outward development of cities. What was once peripheral becomes ostensibly central, what was once a suburb becomes an inner suburb or hardly distinguishable from what we today take for the historic core of a metro area, not least because suburbs have often been annexed as part of cities.

### **The missing post-suburbs of planetary urbanization**

The majority of the world's population now live in officially defined urban areas. This fact alone might signal that we have entered an era of what Lefebvre (2003) termed "planetary urbanization." More profoundly, what Lefebvre pointed to was the fact that the majority of the world now experienced an urban way of life regardless of whether residing in officially defined urban or rural areas. Lefebvre's work is exciting for the research agenda regarding an "urban revolution" that it opens to view. It is an urban revolution that is in large measure a suburban revolution. Yet, one has to look hard to find any reference to (post)suburbs or processes of (post)suburbanization in the burgeoning body of literature on planetary urbanization.

At a fundamental level, there is a unity to the urbanization process that belies academic deliberation over cities and suburbs. Yet, in other respects, attention to (post)suburbs and processes of (post)suburbanization are set already to be underappreciated aspects of planetary urbanization – perhaps

replicating the long-standing lack of interest in and attention to suburbs within urban studies (Harris, 2010). Notwithstanding the difficulties of identifying specifically urban dimensions of socioeconomic processes (Saunders, 1983), the subtly different urban, suburban, and indeed rural questions may disappear from view altogether in this rapidly emerging agenda if all is now urban. Yet, as Ekers et al. (2012) have recently elaborated, it is precisely the explosion – the suburban credentials – of this revolution that are worthy of further investigation, as it is here that the generalized contractions of capitalist planetary urbanization are played out and most visible. For example, to the extent that the urban question is about collective consumption, the less-than-urban properties of suburbs noted previously make them good places to consider the urban question (Phelps et al., 2015). It is the post-suburban transformation of suburbs that provides perhaps the best vantage point to understand the urban question, as suburbs have from their outset posed questions about the making good of deficits of infrastructure, amenities, services, and political representation. In dialectical terms, from the outset, suburbs, and the process of suburbanization contained the seeds of their own negation.

In adhering to the dialectical method, and at an abstract ontological and theoretical level, this lack of reference to (post)suburbs, and the detailed processes of change to which they are subject, *may* of course be entirely correct. Lefebvre's writings provide a highly abstract basis for considering the contemporary urbanization process. With reference to Lefebvre's writings, Nussli (2017) argues against the classification of different settlement types in analysis. However, it is the sheer enormity of this research agenda that really begs for the adoption of approaches that offer tractability, both for proper theoretical elaboration of the potential of this agenda and meaningful empirical validation or exploration of it. Lefebvre's work (2003) may be rather limiting in terms of understanding of urbanization – a process, as I have noted earlier, that in almost all instances involves differentiated settlements and peoples striving for urbanity. Galster et al. (2001), for example, identify eight separate characteristics of urban sprawl as a complex and multifaceted process. The variable geography and morphology of planetary urbanization – its form – must remain an important focus of study within this agenda.

There is a rich tradition of neologisms used in urban studies to depict new forms of urbanization typically in terms of its ever more diffuse and even difficult to delimit nature. Little wonder that Lang and Knox (2009) have argued recently that city and suburb are themselves “zombie” categories. Indeed, earlier work defined the process of post-suburbanization primarily in terms of the new urban-regional scale at which the urbanization process was occurring in places such as North America (Kling et al., 1995). As a result of the mixing of different morphologies and land uses, peripheral settlements became cities in function but not in form (Fishman, 1987). Unless we think that this urban-regional scale of urbanization is exclusive to North America, it is worth noting how the urban-regional scale is one appealed to elsewhere when depicting processes that we might, for convenience's sake, term planetary urbanization. In a European context, particularly in Germany, the term *Zwischenstadt* – or in-between city – resembles such a phenomenon (Sieverts, 2003). Similarly, the term *desakota* (McGee, 1991), which combines the Indonesian words for village and city, has emerged as an influential summary of unique conditions and processes in East Asia. More generally across the Global South, the picture of peripherally located informal settlements found across the Global South has become overlain with gated residential communities, master-planned towns, and industrial parks. At least when viewed at this urban-regional scale, the peripheries of many city-regions of the Global South can look post-suburban, even if there are differences in the context and the balance of forces producing a scale and mix of urbanization similar to parts of the Global North. Thus, in Indonesia, Jakarta's extended urbanization is considered post-suburban (Firman, 2011). In Chile, the periphery of Santiago de Chile is also considered distinctly post-suburban in the mixture of elements (Borsdorf et al., 2007).

However, we should be careful of interpreting the same processes at play in settlement patterns with superficially similar morphology. The geography and morphology of settlement can equally alert us to qualitatively different processes by which suburban communities are becoming urban. Just as questions of urban policy mobility and inter-referencing retain a regional complexion in their relationality (Roy, 2009), so the geography and morphology of (post)suburbanization is regionally distinct in a way that is revealing of potentially different underlying processes of development and further evolution of settlement. Thomas Sieverts' *Zwischenstadt* forms one influential reference point within discourse on planetary urbanization. At one level, the sorts of mixing of urban and rural and uses might prompt comparison to the *desakota* landscape of East Asia. Yet, it would be a mistake to think the processes underlying this “rurban” mixture are anywhere near the same. Despite its ambiguous form, *Zwischenstadt* is fully urban in function in that the vast majority of development and employment is in the formal sector. This contrasts markedly with the fundamental in-betweenity of *desakota* landscapes. *Desakota* captures the betweenity of some instances of planetary urbanization: of communities caught between urban and rural, formal and informal, and modernity and tradition (Phelps, 2017).

### The second modernity of post-suburbanization

A third way one might think of post-suburbia's emergence in different societal settings may suffer less from the limitations of the first two senses of post-suburbia noted previously – as a new era and as new settlement space. This is a definition of post-suburb and post-suburbanization implied in the inherent limits or contradictions of suburbs – as settlements in a process of becoming. In the present this is a sense of a post-suburban era borne of the unintended consequences of modern urbanization and in particular to the manner in which modern state interventions have licensed suburban forms of development with their own contradictions. These inherent contradictions of suburbanization are something to which classic suburbanization studies within the Marxist tradition (e.g., Walker, 1981; Harvey, 1985) alert us, though it should be remembered that they do so with the United States in mind. This, then, is a definition of a post-suburban era measured not in terms of a particular period of time or scale of urbanization, but one measured in terms of a transformation in suburban ideology and politics as a response to the inherent limits or contradictions of suburbs.

The process of suburbanization has itself been a “spatial fix” (Harvey, 1985) for capitalist societies – a vast opportunity zone for all those industries reliant on the development of land for their profits (architects, land speculators, developers, construction and house-building companies, real estate brokers) and a vast market outlet for other industries that supplied all the items that filled up the houses and offices (vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, cars) (Walker, 1981). The building of these suburban expanses did not happen of its own accord. It was licensed by modern state interventions, notably in the form of new credit and new roads that systematically distorted geographical patterns of accessibility at the metropolitan scale and beyond. That is, they greatly increased the accessibility of peripheral land. The thriving U.S. economy during the decades after World War II is inseparable from the physical transformation of U.S. cities that took place in that time (Walker, 1981).

However, if in general state interventions have their own contradictions or unintended consequences (Scott and Rowles, 1977), the suburbs facilitated by some of the largest state interventions also have their specific contradictions. Some examples are the extreme separation of land uses, the additional trips and ultimately congestion these generate, and, in some instances, an exclusionary politics that appears likely to prevent future change (Harvey, 1985). The modern suburb is a confluence of government interventions and rationalized corporate production



and marketing techniques and similar interventions played a big part in the emergence of suburban forms in not just the U.S. but also increasingly elsewhere (in China, Indonesia, and Chile, for example). This might be regarded as a specific instance of the more generalized unintended consequences of modern state interventions as a whole (Beck et al., 2003). It is the unanticipated consequences of a host of modern interventions by states, major corporations, or the technocracy that John Kenneth Galbraith saw making up the merger of the two that have ushered in what Beck refers to as an era of second modernity. Beck concentrates on the unintended environmental consequences of modernity that have prompted more individualized and environmentally conscious politics. Although he does not mention the suburbs, one can hardly speak of the politics of energy consumption and associated global warming without reference to the ongoing processes of suburbanization. That is, modern suburbs contain within them contradictions – the seeds of the post-suburbs of second modernity. The question that arises is whether we can observe anything of Beck’s more generalized politics of second modernity in the suburbs?

In all but its most affluent incarnations, the residential suburb was a development model that was flawed from the start (Gallagher, 2014). Even in the United States, its limitations became apparent almost immediately, setting in motion distinctly post-suburban politics as early as the 1950s (Teaford, 1997). By the 1970s, the urbanization of the suburbs (Masotti and Hadden, 1973) and the emergence of outer cities (Muller, 1975) had become apparent. These developments, among others, can be classified into settlements and their trajectories of change as an initial means to consider the differential politics (Phelps and Wood, 2011; Phelps, 2016). The scheme we offered is not exhaustive. Doubtless some categories of settlement we depicted could be subdivided further, perhaps along the lines described by Harris and Larkham (1999). Aspects of the post-suburban transformation that we focused on are also hardly exclusive to middle-income outer suburbs; they are also found in struggling, older, inner, working-class suburbs (Sweeney and Hanlon, 2017). However, our scheme does start to focus attention on 1) some of the continuities apparent as suburban communities transform into post-suburbs, and 2) the qualitatively different (demographic, economic, and institutional) character, ideology, and politics of settlements, including the variety of suburbs to be found in many extensive city-regions.

We distinguished a class of what might be termed post-suburbs from a class of stable, affluent, residential suburbs – the stereotypical idea of the suburb found in much of the Anglophone and even Global North literature – and from declining inner (often industrial or employment originated) suburbs that may in some instances amount to sub-suburbs. Ostensibly, as Masotti and Hadden (1973) implied and as Teaford (1997) made explicit, the class of post-suburbs in the United States is represented by the communities centered on the numerous “edge cities” that now characterize metropolitan areas (Garreau, 1991). The case of Kendall Dadeland in Miami-Dade County provided one early and only partially successful New Urbanism-inspired fashioning of a downtown for sprawling outer suburban residential areas (Phelps, 2016). The past growth and current plans to reshape Tysons Corner in Fairfax County, Virginia, outside Washington, DC, stand as a prime example of political deliberations implied in suburbs transforming into post-suburbs and into something akin to cities in function, even if not in form. Tysons Corner grew in the first instance precisely in recognition of the fiscal limitations on county government expenditure imposed by the predominantly residential nature of development in Fairfax up until the 1960s. The aggressive recruitment and corralling of business into Tysons Corner was the political bargain struck between business and development elites and residents in order to make good the shortfalls in urban amenities and services that had accumulated to that point. By today, Tysons Corner has succeeded in that role but now contradicts itself to the point that recent planning deliberations have sought to further develop this suburban business center into a proper downtown destination for the surrounding residential communities of Fairfax (Phelps, 2012).

If Tysons Corner is perhaps the best example of the emergence of distinctly post-suburban politics, the same sorts of deliberations are increasingly apparent elsewhere in the edge cities and outer suburbs of the United States – in Houston’s Energy Corridor and in Philadelphia’s King of Prussia to name just two (Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 2009).

It could be argued that the scheme and our writings on post-suburbanization – as with much urban theory – are oriented overly to the Global North and to the North American context in particular. We would not want to deny this, since it was developed from an appreciation of these countries in mind. However, recast in the broader terms of communities seeking to become more urban – more modern even – the process of post-suburbanization is visible, albeit with important differences, for example, in Europe (Phelps et al., 2006; Phelps et al., 2015). It is also not antithetical to the peripherally located settlements of the Global South in which complex and perhaps more multifaceted desires – of states, of individual households, and of corporations alike – for urbanity and modernity coexist.

Across the Global South, states are engaging in the sorts of infrastructure developments seen in the United States with some of the attendant elements of development such as industry and office parks, gated communities and shopping malls. In this regard alone, the challenge of reworking suburbs into something more urban will indeed be salient elsewhere (Forsyth, 2013). At the same time, the sense of modernity inherent in processes of suburbanization across the Global South may run deeper than the appearance of state and corporate infrastructure provision and planning rationalities. It may extend more fundamentally to the individual aspiration to modernity visible within informality as a mode of development. Much of the *desakota* pattern mentioned previously involves the peripheral and ribbon development of self-built kampungs (rural and urban village scale communities). Kampungs themselves are interesting in that they are self-, or rather collectively, built in the first instance for purposes of shelter. However, not only do dwellings evolve to become larger and more permanent over time, the kampung typically also evolves rapidly to become as much a place of work as residence. This happens independently of formal state intervention, but state intervention in the form of housing upgrading programs are an important part of the mix in these distinctive suburban forms.

## Conclusion

If the suburbs and processes of suburbanization have been shunned by all except a small band of historians, they stand to be further ignored in contemporary debates about planetary urbanization. This is curious for some of the reasons outlined earlier. While on the most abstract theoretical level, there is little doubting the unity of urbanization processes that render distinctions between settlement types rather meaningless. It is clear that consideration of different types of (post)suburbs and longitudinal studies of particular (post)suburbs is vital to: 1) meaningful empirical analysis of the urbanization processes; 2) revealing specific contradictions of the urbanization process; and 3) unified analytical discussion.

While according to contemporary sensibilities in urban studies the inductive identification and classification of different types of settlements might be ridiculed for the reductionism imputed to such taxonomies, without such imperfect schemes, there is a very real danger that any and all empirical findings can be poured into generalized theoretical meta-containers without 1) real consideration of significant areal differentiation in urban function and form and 2) real investigation of the very contradictions that are the drivers of the unity of urbanization processes. It is in this sense that entertaining a category of post-suburbs, associated processes of post-suburbanization, and even a post-suburban era can be a useful ingredient in dialectical method when applied to understanding contemporary urbanization.



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