

## **Reconceptualising 21<sup>st</sup> century suburbs. Character, context, and growth pressures in London's Outer Boroughs.**

*Dr Dimitrios Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, The Bartlett School of Planning, University College London.*

*Dr Lucy Natarajan, The Bartlett School of Planning, University College London.*

In March 2020, a Suburban Taskforce was established with the goal of shedding light on the nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century British suburbs and identifying long-term strategies and policies to support suburban areas. This Taskforce was formed from a cross-party group of politicians, with University College London (UCL) as a Knowledge Partner, supported by an Advisory Board and informed by a public consultation, which ran from August to October 2020. This article draws upon the qualitative and quantitative evidence gathered during this initiative and unpacks conceptual and empirical observations linked to the character of suburbs and their relationship to urban areas.

### ***A contextual reconceptualisation of suburbs***

The physically peripheral parts of larger cities that are traditionally considered suburbs have attracted considerable attention and generated lengthy debates over the years, and no less so during the current environment of global uncertainty and crisis. Notwithstanding the rich seam of research and diverse policy initiatives oriented towards 'the suburban', historical debates continue over the nature and character of suburbs. Of particular concern today is an apparent dependence of the urban core on the 'outer city' to alleviate the growth pressures on major cities and accommodate overspill of residents where housing is unaffordable in the centre.

A recurrent observation is that the assumed purposes of suburbs or what policy expects of them does not always sufficiently reflect the needs of existing residents and local populations. Although the reasons for this are multifaceted and complex, the lack of a strategic approach to suburbs is believed to fuel the oversimplification of the 'suburban experience', and an inaccurate understanding of what suburbs really are. This article argues that looking at suburbs through a contextual lens represents an opportunity to reconcile their socio-economic, political, and spatial features towards an alternative more situated and nuanced understanding.

Looking at modern British suburbs the initial and perhaps most elementary question is whether there could be a clear definition of what constitutes a suburb? It is generally understood that suburban areas differ considerably from both more rural and central urban locations, but the assumption that suburbs are merely the third and final component in the urban-suburban-rural triptych is at best an oversimplification and in any case unhelpfully reductive. Located between cities and rural areas, suburbs certainly share various aspects of both environments but just as cities and their countryside are not at all identical, so suburbs vary considerably not only between cities but also within cities. In order to avoid superficial explorations and turn towards concentrated efforts to delve deeper into the contextual characteristics and challenges that

distinguish suburbs, the initial focus of the taskforce is on the Outer Boroughs of the city of London, UK.

**Focus: London's suburbs.**

The socio-economic situation of suburbs, including patterns of work, life, and play, are intrinsically linked to a perceived spatial imbalance between centre and suburbs. In London, this antithesis is closely related to the housing market and particularly a quality concern around the provision of housing. The impact that the affordability of London has on newcomers and especially young urban dwellers, pushes them to look for affordable options in Outer London Boroughs. There, the lower density of semi-detached architectural typologies offers quality accommodation, self-containment, and privacy. The original urban form may help to generate a sense of historic local community, fostered by local political and social activity and a strong local collective memory. And the overall levels of open space and greenery as compared to more central areas offers a more pleasant, less polluted environment. Still, in terms of way of life, there are trade-offs to living in the suburbs. The availability of services as opposed to more central locations is limited (i.e. less frequent public transport, lower number of schools and surgeries per capita, and fewer entertainment options) and this requires additional travel to fulfil these needs implying that people with reduced mobility options could be negatively impacted. Nevertheless, in many ways, suburbs are perceived to offer a great alternative to the congested and more expensive urban centre in terms of built and natural environment.

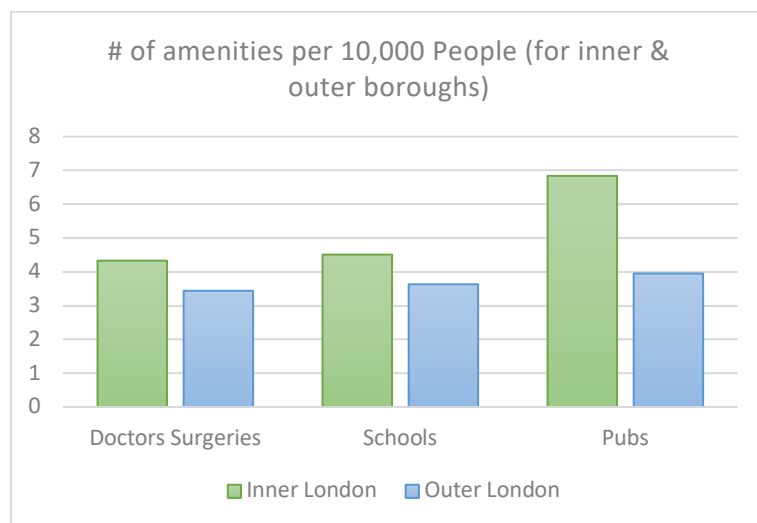


Figure 1 Number of amenities (doctor surgeries, schools and pubs) per 10.000 people for Inner and Outer London Boroughs.

This spatial offer of suburbs (combined with their relative affordability) may make them a lifestyle destination of sorts, as distinct from either the city or the countryside. Hence, suburbs are attractive to a very wide spectrum of people and this places pressure on the housing market and primarily the private rental sector. Furthermore, within the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and responses to the crisis, the working-from-home patterns have increased substantially the attractiveness of suburban areas due to unprecedented issues related to space availability and affordability.

In response to the pressures and attractiveness of suburbs, there are two emerging approaches to development in outer London, gentle densification, or targeted densification. There are place quality concerns related to both, which are loosely connected to de-gentrification. Consultation responses, evidence the passionate criticism of the level of intensity seen in recent developments and strong demand for the conservation of local character. At the same time, there is a recognition of the need for more affordable housing. As such the consultation responses suggest better quality affordable housing in keeping with local vernacular is beneficial for existing communities and new residents. Nonetheless, from a planning standpoint there is a tension between preserving the quality of life afforded by lower density suburban living, whilst trying to address issues such as congestion, climate change, affordability and the requirement to meet more strategic housing needs.

At first glance, these patterns seem homogeneous across suburbs, but in fact place character is extremely diverse among Outer London Boroughs. This is observable in the great disparity of urban forms and the unevenly scattered distribution of services across administrative wards. Data on housing, urban form, and service level<sup>1</sup> suggests that there is a range or a spectrum of suburban character and highlights that the suburban experience is not uniform. Instead, it differs between boroughs and is dependent on local attributes of the urban environment. These nuances reveal an additional layer of complexity behind the question of whether and how to coordinate policy responses for city suburbs. It also shows that appreciating the distinctive characteristics of these areas, is essential to understanding distinctive local challenges, and supporting communities' quality of life.

### ***Towards a new suburban understanding***

Unpacking the experience of contemporary suburban localities is complex and challenging. Although aiming to comprehensively define suburbs might appear to be futile, it is an important and vital exercise towards understanding the 'suburban condition' more fully. Questioning the nature of suburbs is part of finding a new approach to their spatial and environmental development and re-configuring the urban environment in a responsive and coordinated manner rather than through one-size-fits-all initiatives.

This inquiry into the character of suburbs was driven by the fundamental acknowledgement that suburban dwellers choose their place of residence at least in part because they expect to enjoy a particular set of qualities that do not exist in either more central or rural areas. These conditions and expectations however are not constant, they change with time and in line with culture, society and the exigencies of contemporary daily life. Hence, it is essential to ensure a wider recognition that the solutions offered to suburban challenges need to reflect the changing needs or expectations of local communities.

The key characteristics, opportunities, and challenges of suburbs should be the basis for helping steer decision-making towards actions capable of supporting suburban areas as they evolve. Towards this, working with localities and communities is fundamental to develop more appropriate goals and visions. These explorations raise new questions and lines of inquiry. Amidst the disjointed contemporary trajectory of urban transformation, the danger of

---

<sup>1</sup> Descriptive statistics on land use, population, land area, and built form generously provided by the Estates Gazette.

unexpected crises and general context of uncertainty, there is a growing need to reconsider how policies and governance actors respond to the effects of growth pressures on suburbs to avoid eroding and better support their richness, quality of place and sense of community.

Looking at London's Outer Boroughs has added weight to notions of suburban areas as more residential, less dense, and more limited in terms of services. Most importantly however, it appeared that there is a discrepancy in suburban character across Boroughs and their respective wards. From a policy standpoint, a universal suburban strategy is unsuited to dealing with complex suburban issues. Instead, the relationships between suburbs need to be better articulated, potentially with a new platform for doing so. The diversity of London's Outer Boroughs as discussed here highlights that it would be a mistake to consider them broadly – or simply – as suburban. Instead there is a need to recognise that different neighbourhoods and locales require individual attention but in view of the interaction between wider pressures and given the unevenness of provision (i.e. of housing and services), they also need to have a means to wider coordination with other parts of their cities. Only then will policies move towards spatially just development.