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## The suburbs as sites of 'within-planning' power relations

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## **The suburbs as sites of ‘within-planning’ power relations.**

*Despite a long-standing and varied body of literature on suburban difference a simplified narrative of the suburbs persists represented by a city-suburb binary; this despite an extensive literature focusing on the diversity of the suburbs. This is damaging as it undermines our understanding of the social dynamics of the places in which, in the UK, the majority of the population live. This article looks at the reasons for the persistence of city-suburb binary. It engages with suburban housing as a Bourdieuan field in order to show how simplified characterisations of the suburban are in the interests of powerful interest groups, including within planning. Bourdieu’s field theory offers a powerful means to understanding how judgements of the suburbs are naturalised and so become common sense truths. As field theory indicates ‘within planning’ power relations that support particular truths, the lens of the field also offers the possibility of challenging such power relations by exposing the taken-for-granted norms of the suburban housing field.*

Key words: suburbs, Bourdieu, housing fields, planning culture.

## Introduction

A number of writers have noted that the Anglo-American suburbs are still characterised in overly simple terms (for example Nicolaides 2002; Tongson 2011; Vaughan et al 2009). This persists despite a burgeoning academic literature that focuses on the social complexity of these suburbs. The Anglo-American suburbs are all too often regarded in binary terms, as representing a place of almost absolute difference to, and separation from, the city. In this article the focus is on the persistence of the binary view of, and policy approaches to, the suburbs. It is argued that the theoretical approach of Bourdieu is pertinent in demonstrating that this is not a simple oversight, a failure to engage with a more nuanced view of the suburbs. Rather, Bourdieu allows us to look at this lacuna in terms of a power relationship between influential planning discourses and the suburbs, which suggests the antipathy towards recognising the complexity of the suburbs is likely to endure. This is because it is rooted not in passive ignorance but in a positive deployment of power, including within the planning and architecture professions. Others have already sought to incorporate Bourdieu's work into planning theory, to understand better the politics of urban planning (Shin 2013) and specifically planning politics in the suburbs (Huxley 2001). Of most direct relevance here is the use of his theory to argue for greater reflexivity in planning research and practice (Howe and Langdon 2002; Binder 2012). This article adds to this previous work by focusing on how a Bourdieuan approach can explain the persistence of a city-suburb binary as the exercise of 'within planning' power relations. This is distinct from other work that focuses on relations between planning and other interest groups involved in urban development (Howe and Langdon 2002; Shin 2013).

There is an increasing recognition of the wide variety of suburban forms internationally (Clapson 2003; Clapson & Hutchins 2010; Phelps & Wu 2011; Keil 2013). However, the focus here is on the Anglo-American suburb as the most dominant form in terms of documentation in the literature. Also, because it is the Anglo-American suburb that has been cast in binary terms as a place of privilege seeking to isolate itself from the deprivations of the inner city. In the first section we turn briefly to a definition of this suburban form before considering how dominant planning discourses treat the Anglo-American suburb. We trace the history of the relationship between the Anglo-American suburb and planning through to the contemporary position in the UK. It is argued that this history includes the establishing of a dominant planning discourse that draws heavily on a suburban-

urban binary. This despite the evidence suggesting that a more nuanced approach would be more reflective of the interplay between the city and the suburbs. We go on to consider why the binary approach retains its dominance; here we find the theory of Bourdieu a powerful explanatory tool. In the second section attention turns to Bourdieu's field theory. Particular attention is given to the field of housing – that is, to a set of relations where different types of housing are ascribed different status by, and confer different status on, individuals. Finally, in the third section we consider the potential of the Bourdieuan field to lead to a more reflexive approach to practice that is more attuned to 'within-planning' power relations. While fields serve to naturalise positions they do not simply work in a linear or deterministic way; as people take up positions within a field others will seek to challenge these. Therefore, field theory highlights the possibility of revealing, and so contesting dominant narratives while underscoring their likely persistence. This is because those already in positions of power are in a powerful position to resist challenges. Therefore, it illuminates, but offers no easy solutions to, the city/suburban binary.

### **Planning and the suburb**

The concern here is with the Anglo-American suburb, in particular as found in the UK. The Anglo-American suburbs are low-density and characterised by, but not exclusively comprised of, middle-class owner-occupation. There are considerable variations across the Anglo-American suburbs both within and between national settings. The UK has a much more contained model as compared to that in the US and Australia. In the UK the ubiquitous suburban 'semi' reflects the relatively higher cost of land - even at the time of construction (Saint 1999). Despite this, UK suburbs are still targeted for being in need of specific interventions to make them more sustainable (GLA 2006). The call for improved sustainability can include the need to make both physical and social changes to these suburbs. Critics of the suburbs often make explicit and/or implicit links between the suburban built form and society. For example, the suburbs have been closely associated with the rise of mass consumerism (Silverstone 1997; Mumford 1968). Oftentimes, as Clapson (2003) notes, this is associated with a barely hidden misogynistic view of suburban women as the uncritical subjects of consumerism. Similarly, writers have noted the way in which the spatial separation of the city and the suburb has been used to reinforce social divisions. The Anglo-American suburb is criticised for seeking to exclude others as residents seek to maintain a homogenous and privileged neighbourhood. In the UK this has focused mainly on class (Clapson 2003, Willmott & Young 1976), but more recent writing has focused on ethnicity too (Grillo 2005; Phillips et al 2007).

While this linking of the physical and social as part of wider condemnation of the suburbs may not always be groundless it is important to distinguish between the two in order to avoid any suggestion of a causative link between the built form and the society that inhabits it. In order to mark the difference Keil (2013) proposes the nomenclature suburban (to represent the physical) and suburbanism (to represent the social); this terminology is adopted here.

Powerful and valid charges are made against the suburban and suburbanism but there is the danger particular suburbanisms are wrapped together with a particular suburban form and then compared to the city in a simplistic, binary manner. Where a binary is deployed, it tends to over-emphasise the consistency within each of the opposing parts. In this case, the city and suburb where the category of city and suburb are each taken to encompass a respective commonality that does not stand up to close scrutiny. Furthermore, binaries overplay the difference between the two opposing parts as similarities between the two are played down (Cloke & Johnston 2005). The difference between the city and the suburbs (both the suburban and suburbanism) is not as clear as a binary approach suggests. Turning first to the physical, over two decades ago, work by Garreau noted the transition of some suburbs into urban sub-centres or edge cities (Garreau 1992); in London Croydon serves as the clearest example of an edge city (Phelps et al 2006). These are suburbs that have come to contain many aspects that we might associate with the city, including higher levels of office development, density of population and associated increases in traffic. In this context, and reflecting the work of the LA School, Cochrane (2011) argues that London's 'leafy-green suburbs' are to be found across the southeast of England rather than within London's jurisdiction. Such work has the benefit of placing change in the suburbs in the context of broader shifts in the patterns of urban development which include both centralisation and dispersal. At the local level, while suburbs are often comprised of large tracts of similar housing, after development these are often adapted and personalised providing space for varied family forms through extension and other alteration (Carr, 1982; Barker, 2009; Whitehand and Carr, 2001) and, more broadly, the suburban form provides numerous opportunities for adaptation, providing, for example, opportunities for small business-use especially in and around local High Streets (Vaughan et al., 2009).

The absolute or binary differences between the city and suburb also break down if we look at suburbanisms. Here the literature covers a wide range of methodological approaches but a core feature is its attempt to widen out our understanding of society

in suburban locations. While the dominant view of the Anglo-American suburb is one of owner-occupier, middle-class white residents the literature shines a light on the diversity of suburbanism. This can be categorised simply as first, a body of work that seeks to nuance middle-class experience of the suburbs. An example of this approach is work which rejects the reduction to a single experience, the life experience of suburban middle-class women (Dowling 1998; Strong-Boag et al 1999). A second body of work looks at the presence of groups other than the white middle-class. This looks in particular at the working-class (Clapson 1998, 2003; Harris 1996; Kruse & Sugrue 2006), and ethnic minorities (Jones-Correa 2006; Li 2009; Phillips et al., 2007) in the suburbs. This second category has both a historical and contemporary dimension. In the case of London, Saint (1989) notes the longstanding presence of social housing in the suburbs as the then London County Council developed estates outside its jurisdiction in the first half of the twentieth century. This has led to a longstanding, if sparse, tradition of case studies of working class residents in outer London. Examples include Glass' (née Durant) study of Burnt Oak in northwest London (Durant 1939), and Willmott and Young's work on suburban working class residents to the East of London (Willmott & Young 1976). Contemporary UK literature on different suburbanisms includes work on Asian-British residents in outer London (Huq 2013, Mace 2013, Watson & Saha 2012).

Many city cores have seen the intensification of service and finance industries which require high levels of social interaction that have led to a burgeoning city core. This has led to a change in preferences for residential location. Glass (née Durant) went on to coin the term gentrification to describe her observation of the inward movement of parts of the middle-class to areas such as Islington in inner London. Whereas the middle-classes had previously abandoned places such as Islington to move to more suburban locations, initially Stoke Newington but later to the inter-war suburbs, now some were returning to the centre or never leaving for the suburbs. The drivers of gentrification are complex and beyond a full consideration here. However, one aspect of particular pertinence is raised by Butler & Robson (2003). They note, through interview work, how dual-income households in high level financial and service employment based in the city core are required to be available 24/7. Both the changing gender patterns of employment and the 'out of hours' demands of service and financial careers are factors that have contributed towards making the commute to the suburbs less attractive for some households.

New waves of gentrifiers have been criticised for seeking to bring to the city characteristics for which the suburbs were once criticised. This includes seeking out or developing neighbourhoods of similar middle-class individuals (Tonkiss 2006), and vertical gating (Rykwert 2004; Le Goix & Webster 2008) which can provide a similar detachment from neighbourhood as horizontal gating in the suburbs. These developments are often associated with the 'mass' or commercial gentrification of the city. Early gentrification was associated with some openness to existing residents. But as it has developed, new waves of people engaged in gentrification and super-gentrification (Lees 2003a) appear less committed to neighbourhoods of difference (Butler & Robson 2003). Given that the suburbs are increasingly more diverse than they once were (as the city is 'rediscovered' by the middle classes), and the social tensions thrown up as gentrification 'suburbanises' the city (Tonkiss 2006), we might expect planning to reflect this ambiguity and to resist any city-suburban binary that depicts one location as simply the opposite of the other.

### ***Planning critiques***

The mass suburbs of the twentieth century have been criticised since their inception. CIAM (Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne) was founded in 1928 with Le Corbusier as a dominant voice, in August 1933 it produced 95 declarations including a number highly critical of the suburbs, which were described as, "...a kind of scum churning against the walls of the city" (Observation 20 cited in Oliver et al 1981:40). In the UK, early opposition to twentieth century mass suburbanisation came from, among others, the architect Nairn (1955) and social commentators Gordon & Gordon (1933). The condemnation continued to develop along with the suburbs. For Mumford, writing in the 1960s, the suburbs were inextricably linked, for the worse, to the growth of mass-consumption;

In the mass movement into suburban areas a new kind of community was produced, which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge: a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold...

(Mumford 1968: 486)

Swenarton (2002) traces a brief flurry of empathy for the suburbs in the 1970s and 1980s reflecting the approach of Venturi et al (1972) in the US; this includes Taylor (1973) and Oliver et al (1981). However empathy for the mass-suburb was relatively short-lived and, after the decline of modernism, the city model that was to emerge in the UK drew on the medieval walled city; where the suburbs were 'outwith' the city (Swenarton 2002). Seamlessly linking two historical periods, the medieval city was to underpin the (urban) renaissance in the UK. The architect Sir Richard Rogers chaired the influential Urban Task Force report from which the suburbs were almost entirely absent. It is hard to find much in the way of a concession to the suburbs in the report and one member of the Urban Task Force (Sir Peter Hall) very publically dissented because of the focus. A policy requirement in the UK favouring housing development on previously used (brownfield) land was produced in 1998. This has been one of the most effective ways of promoting housing in the city and this became increasingly entrenched as a development method as house-builders have adapted their product to deliver on previously used city sites (Karadimitriou 2013). Although not a direct outcome of the Task Force report, which was published in 1999, the Task Force was sitting at the time the new policy was formulated and formed part of the wider discourse that saw the introduction of a target for brownfield use. In the UK the Urban Task Force report contributed to the linking of the physical and social, where higher density was asserted as the means to deliver a number of social benefits including facilitating the mixing of different social groups. This was a link that, while contested by some (Bridge et al 2012; Cheshire et al 2014), became policy orthodoxy under New Labour in the UK. Once again we see the binary at work as the social city form is contrasted with the unsocial suburban one; leading Jarvis et al (2001) to observe; "...there is an assumption that some spatial forms are inherently social and others anti-social" (p21).

The restricted engagement of policymakers with the day-to-day realities of the suburban and suburbanism is a core theme of the work of Jarvis et al (2001). Their research is concerned with how more sustainable suburbanism might be encouraged. They argue that policymakers should move away from simple prescriptive measures based on a binary view of the suburb that simply depict current lifestyles and patterns of living in the suburbs as problematic. They appeal for a more nuanced understanding of how and why suburban households live the way they do. Often, they observed, locational and transport decisions were driven by the demands of simply getting by in the city, of managing the pressures simply of 'being there'. People were struggling to find somewhere affordable to live from where they



could access schools and multiple employment locations. Household choices of location and car use respond to the complex demands of day to day life and to simply dismiss these as unsustainable would be to fail to recognise the demands on residents not least on women in the suburbs. They conclude by appealing to policy makers to be more sensitive to the complexity of everyday life in the suburbs. However, a Bourdieuan interpretation suggests that such an engagement is unlikely to flow from such arguments no matter how well constructed. The dominant planning discourse that renders the suburbs as only problematic is unlikely readily to be adapted because there is a vested interest in other urban forms (Dovey 2010). In order to develop this argument we now turn to Bourdieu's field theory.

### **Housing as a field**

The problem then, is not the absence of a rich body of material detailing suburban complexity and variety. Rather, the challenge is to understand why the suburbs tend still to be dismissed, in binary terms, as the other of the desirable city. Bourdieu offers a powerful insight as, once we conceptualise housing and neighbourhood choices as fields we can better understand how vested interest might seek to maintain this characterisation of the suburb and why. It provides, then, a means of deconstructing the city-suburb binary that dominates planning. Rather than planners simply occupying the objective high ground of the expert urbanist in proposing, common sense 'truths' about the suburbs-city binary, such stances come to be viewed more as position taking which can include a strong element of self-interest (Dovey 2010). To develop the argument it is necessary, first, to provide a brief overview of Bourdieu's theory. Numerous works describe Bourdieu's schema of habitus, field and capitals (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Swartz, 1998), there is neither the space nor the necessity to reproduce much of this. Broadly speaking the habitus and capitals describe a disposition and a set of 'skills' or attributes that people possess, other works on the suburbs have drawn on this aspect of Bourdieu's work (for example Duncan & Duncan 2004; Fleischer 2010). Habitus represents a general disposition, a way of seeing, acting in and acting on the world. In addition people 'possess' social, economic and cultural capital. Habitus inclines people to engage in fields and, once engaged habitus and capitals equip people to take varying positions within any given field. The focus here is on how an understanding of fields might be usefully applied to the planning-suburb relationship. As described by Bourdieu, fields are,

A network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determination they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.).

(Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:97)

In the field we see Bourdieu's attempt to recognise the interplay between individual agency and determining social forces as, "...fields are places both of forces and struggles" (1993: 30). This point is developed first by considering the agenda setting power of the field. The field contains the universe of discourse or that which is open for consideration (Figure 1). The range of positions within a field extends between orthodoxy and heterodoxy but the extent of this range is contained by doxa. For Bourdieu doxa contains those things that are hidden but that might otherwise be considered; if they were fully apparent to participants in the field. The parameters for discussion are therefore set within the field as the doxa delineate the field; they define the universe of the discussed. Doxa, therefore, acts like a set of rules in that they serve to limit the actions and the thoughts of those in the field.

PLACE FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

However, the field is never entirely stable or fixed. Bourdieu observes, "The dominated class have an interest in pushing back doxa, exposing its arbitrariness while the dominating classes have an interest in resisting this or at worst letting doxa come to be seen but as a new orthodoxy" (1977:169). The revealing and challenging of doxa can occur through the expression of opinion, although it will only form an effective challenge where the opinion can find traction. That the UK should have an entirely nationalised system for housing is an opinion that one could state although it is unlikely to find much traction at the present time for example; given the dominance of neo-liberal, market dominated housing solutions. The existence of doxa means that such an opinion simply appears untenable. Of particular significance is how doxa serves to make the limited pallet of options take on the character of the self-evident, or, of common sense. If an opinion is untenable then those that remain acquire legitimacy as the only tenable options. The process by which the tenable (in

Bourdieu's terms 'the universe of discourse, or argument' 1977:168), has been created and is sustained becomes hidden, as do the interests of those whom benefit from its maintenance. This is reinforced by a strong positive feedback loop where empirically generated knowledge reinforces received wisdom, "...because the subjectivity necessity and self-evidence of the common-sense world are validated by the objective consensus on the sense of the world, what is essential *goes without saying because it comes without saying*: the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition...." (Bourdieu 1977: 167 emphasis in original).

Within the terms of this discussion, the superiority of certain urban forms and the inferiority of others come to be, more-or-less, self-evident. In discussing how architects come to objectify good architectural taste (while 'hiding' judgement), Dovey (2010) focuses on the role of symbolic capital in Bourdieu's work. Although Bourdieu's thinking on symbolic capital shifted over the course of its use, he came to view symbolic capital as an aspect of economic, social and cultural capital. Symbolic capital was those aspects of economic, social and cultural capital that came to be seen as 'natural' or 'given'. This 'hiding' of the function of capital, Bourdieu referred to as a 'misrecognition' (Bourdieu 2000: 242 cited Dovey 2010:35). Therefore, when the Urban Task Force promoted the urban core over the suburbs in binary terms the position of its members is more obvious than contentious. As a recognised group of practitioners whose habitus inclines them to - and who are able to deploy their capitals to particular effect - they come to have the power to consecrate particular forms of urbanism. Much as Bourdieu argues that a group of art critics might capture the ability to confer status on works of art (Bourdieu 1993), some architect-planners can become particularly influential in conferring status on particular urban forms. In the housing field a group of elite architects or a small core of leading planners with the help of professional recognition may be able to capture the ability to assert particular tastes in the same way as Bourdieu's art critics. In some cases we can identify particular individuals; in the case of Rogers we can trace a direct route through the Urban Task Force. However, Bourdieu is concerned with the interplay in the field between an individual and the structure of the field. While at a particular point we might be able to identify an influential individual we have also to remember Bourdieu's structuralist argument - that the field maintains dominant discourses that transcend any particular person. Therefore, we have also to look at how the wider institutions of planning, including organisations such as the Academy of Urbanism or the Royal Town Planning Institute may lend weight to dominant discourses. Importantly, as Bourdieu argued, the misrecognition of the exercise of capitals has

the effect of hiding this support as an exercise of judgement and, rather, makes it appear as self-evident. Symbolic capital serves to support the doxa, to tacitly delimit what can and cannot be contested within a field. Following Swenarton's (2002) argument, we therefore need to look not only for direct commentary on the suburbs but also to be aware of the absence of the suburbs from discussion of the urban.

However, this does not mean that only one type of urban form is produced. Within the housing field there are complex sets of relationships that both guide and shape the production of the urban form. Planners and architects are not the only professions engaged in the shaping and production of the built form. In an extensive study of fields within housing production, Bourdieu (2005) looks at the relationship between producers of 'popular' housing and consumers. As Bourdieu argues, producing a particular product does not necessarily create consumer demand but neither does demand necessarily lead to the production of a particular product. In the case of housing he traces how developers in France sought both to respond to and shape demand by playing on perceptions of an authentic, artisan-built house. In the case of the inter-war mass suburb in the UK, the house-builders offered a product that simultaneously referenced an imagined past (Tudor-bethan facades) and the future (white goods, garaging for a car etc) (Jackson 1973). The outcome of this interaction produces mass or popular taste expressed through a housing product separate from 'elite' or 'consecrated' versions of the urban. A secondary implication of this is that even within the mass suburbs there will be products of relatively higher and lower status. However, this 'distinction' occurs within a housing form that is more generally marked as being relatively low status (mass-suburbanisation).

Similarly, when considering the actually-produced urban form, there is an iterative relationship between suburbanisms and politicians where the one can be seen to shape the other. The suburbs are seen as the heartland of the centrist vote and so represent an electorate more to be wooed rather than challenged. A small body of work in the UK has looked at the relationship between the suburbs and voting behaviour (Cox, 1968; Walks, 2005). Although the findings have sometimes been more ambiguous than conclusive, there is evidence that political parties think in terms of an urban/suburban split with the urban cores traditionally being more left wing and the suburbs more right wing. In the UK, after many years in opposition the left of centre Labour Party rebranded themselves New Labour and identified the suburban vote, once seen as the invincible green suburbs by the Conservative party, as the place that held the key to electoral victory (Clapson 1998). Therefore, despite

a modest national policy indicating minimum densities under New Labour, its urban renaissance project was not anti-suburban in its general thrust. More broadly, the values underpinning the New Labour project might be argued to have drawn on a communitarian self-help agenda (Imrie & Raco 2003), that reflects stereotypical, if not actual, characteristics of suburbanism.

The existence of field dynamics between developers and housing sub-markets and between politicians and housing consumers produces urban environments that are far from those depicted as 'naturally' superior by consecrating actors in the housing field. This 'failure' is essential as it serves to support rather than undermine opinion formers within planning & architecture. For Bourdieu people engage in fields to seek distinction, to put themselves in a favourable position in relation to others. As Dovey (2010) puts it, distinction has the characteristic of a zero sum game. If everyone 'gets' elite taste it ceases to be so. Insofar as political support for the suburb remains in order to garner the mass vote and developers work with a mass-market, this simply confirms to those with the power to consecrate, the self-evident correctness of their judgement. The very popularity of a product, a piece of art or the built form renders it less likely to be, or to remain, consecrated (back to Mumford's condemnation of suburban residents for having the same food from the same freezers). There is, for Bourdieu, an inverse correlation of 'distinction' and popularity;

The sense of good investment which dictates a withdrawal from outmoded, or simply devalued , objects, places or practices and a move into ever newer objects in a drive for novelty, and which operates in every area, sport and cooking, holiday resorts and restaurants is guided by countless different indices and indications from the explicit warnings...to barely conscious intuitions, which like the awareness of popularization or overcrowding, insidiously arouse horror or disgust for the objects or practices that have become common.

(Bourdieu 1984:249)

Some consumers of housing with the appropriate habitus will 'get it'; they will understand the status that certain housing and locations can confer upon them. As in the case of housing developers and the consumers of mass housing, there is not an automatic reciprocation. A few powerful individuals do not simply dictate high status housing types and a market follows. Rather there is interplay between those who are

relatively more influential in influencing discourses of high status urbanism and those who consume housing. The field represents a meeting of individual agency and structured relations as no one individual or small group can simply dictate what housing or urban form will be high status. Rather, there is a quality of zeitgeist about the field. When the Urban Task Force focused on city living and more-or-less wrote out the suburbs, their focus resonated with an already-happening change. As Lees (2003b) has argued, the Urban Task Force drew heavily on an imagery of gentrification even though it did not reference the term. The promotion of city living has its genesis in gentrification and this has long defined itself in contradistinction to suburban culture (Butler & Robson 2003). Bourdieu's field theory suggests, therefore, that rather than being confounded by the persistence of a city-suburb binary we should instead expect it. Once we focus on how the field helps some to seek distinction through the consumption of particular housing types and neighbourhoods we are able to draw attention to how criticism of the suburbs legitimates choices. With the field and symbolic capital rendering taste as innately, in this case, on the side of the city. (Bourdieu 1993:34).

### **The suburbs as touchstone of 'within-panning' power.**

For Bourdieu not everyone within in a field is equal and, in particular, not all are equally able to influence the rules of the field. Expressing preferences within a field can, therefore, represent an act of powerlessness where the 'wrong' preferences are chosen. That planners work within the context of power relations is not revelatory, but Howe & Langdon (2002:221) add a Bourdieuan aspect to this when they note, "Planning is constituted by a system of social positions defined by the struggle between different actors in the development process." However, the significant point that is argued here is that power relationships are strongly represented within planning, between planners, as well as between a singular 'profession' and others. While the focus is more often the exercise of power between the private and state sectors or between planners and community, field theory highlights the existence of 'within planning' power struggles. For most, successful engagement in a field involves more the ability to appreciate and play by the dominant rules rather than influencing them (Bourdieu 1984). One consequence of this is that for many planners the reality of engaging in a field may be about passively supporting dominant discourses (Binder 2012), of simply adhering to the dominant view in order to succeed in their chosen professional field. Being successful in the field involves making the 'right' choices; possibly adopting a heterodox rather than an orthodox

position but not seeking to voice the 'outlandish' – or that which sits within the universe of the undiscussed. If the housing field offers a means to explaining the persistence of a simplified view of the suburbs (it is in the interests of the elite seeking distinction in the housing field), then it also highlights a possible limitation of the Bourdieuan approach; essentially, its hierarchical, structuralist underpinning. For, if those with a particular habitus and capitals are more able to manipulate a view of mass suburbanisation as a failure of distinction, as vulgar, tasteless and so forth, then planners with a different view (and suburbanites themselves) are left with little ability to seek advantage through the housing field except on the terms of those in a more dominant position than them – and so always from a position of inferiority. This returns us to a deterministic view of social relations that Bourdieu sought to avoid. However, for a social constructivist such as Bourdieu, the production and re-production of advantage through transmitting the rules of the field is not perfect. Position taking within the field brings participants into potential conflict with others in a field as, "...every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field;..." (Bourdieu 1993:30). Position taking can, therefore, provoke resistance as well as compliance. The possibility of alternative discourses of the suburban exists even if these are likely to struggle for legitimacy for as long as they fail to accord with the interests of elites within the housing field. Being aware of the power interests within the housing field does not immediately facilitate a challenge to the dominant discourse. But in making us more aware of doxa, of what might be open to discussion, it opens up the possibility of challenging the positionality of influential architects and planners within a housing field. It offers the potential to 'de-naturalise' the dominant stance on the suburbs and to integrate into the knowledge of practice the burgeoning literature on suburban difference and, in so doing, to challenge binary descriptions of the relationship between the city and the suburb.

This matters in a practical sense because, as Hall (2000) noted, all too often planning fails to distinguish between good and bad suburbia as the city-suburban binary precludes this. This closing down can diminish positive planning for better suburbs, and also invites reactionary counter-claims from those who are aware that they cannot readily influence the dominant professional discourse of planning. If positive consideration of the suburb is not within the realm of the discussed then one countermove is to challenge power relations in the field through reaction to it. If the field closes down what can be discussed, then the doxa can be challenged by outspoken views on the suburbs. This has the potential to encourage revanchist pro-

suburban arguments in order to break with the hegemony of the field. One example of this has been the use of term 'superbia' to call for more of the suburbia we have. Simply put, the argument is that as most people live in the suburbs, people clearly want it, and therefore, it must be a good thing. Therefore, we should build more of it (Booth 2007)<sup>1</sup>. In seeking to make a forceful counter-argument, once again, the nuancing of the suburb (and indeed of the city-suburb continuum) is lost. Once again our attention is turned from a nuanced consideration of the suburbs, but this time in favour of a crude 'suburbia is good' argument.

## **Conclusion**

It has been argued that the burgeoning literature on the variety of the Anglo American suburban and suburbanism is not reflected in a planning discourse which all too often reduces the suburbs down to the lesser partner in a city-suburb binary; where, in essence, the former possess positive and the latter negative characteristics. In particular we have highlighted in the UK the work of the Urban Task Force in which the suburbs were largely absent. As we saw, the Anglo-American suburb's form (the suburban) and society (suburbanism) present a series of challenges both historically and in their contemporary state. The Anglo-American suburb is associated with extensive land use, dependence on the private car, sometimes with social segregation and so on. These aspects are neither dismissed nor minimised here. Rather, the purpose has been to argue that while we should recognise the shortcomings of the Anglo-American suburb we must *also* recognise the aspect of 'within-planning' power that runs through critiques of the Anglo-American suburb.

Bourdieu's field theory warrants attention because of its ability to reveal the power interests that sit behind objective or common-sense positions. The field theory approach can help to facilitate the deconstruction of the hidden domination by the elite of the suburban discourse – that is, it allows us to see how 'natural' positions on the suburbs as undesirable hide the power interests of elites who are able to dominate the housing field – including to further their own pursuit of distinction as consumers of housing. In practice, the field serves to hide 'within-planning' power relations because matters of taste and culture can be presented as 'natural' or given. The effect of the field is to normalise or make less visible the value judgements and

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<sup>1</sup> The term superbia has recently been taken up by those arguing for a more nuanced look at the possible contribution of London's suburbs to the city as a whole; see for example Derbyshire (2014).



power-play of the participants and, in particular, those more dominant participants who are more able to modify the rules of the game. In this context the superiority of city over suburban space, city living over suburban lifestyles, city over suburban housing takes on a self-evident nature; rather than *including* matters of judgement and taste *alongside* questions of environmental and social sustainability. In this way the exercise of power by the powerful in setting planning agendas is hidden by a slight of hand. The powerful simply appear to prefer those things that happen to be better urbanism. Field theory opens up to us how the maintenance of a city-suburb binary is supported by a subjective judgement of taste that has been rendered objective through the operation of the field. Revealing position-taking on the suburban and suburbanism opens up to question the city-suburb binary by focusing on who is defining the suburb and pronouncing on its failings. Moreover, it also offers up the possibility of countering elitist tendencies within planning by asking who is being looked over and pronounced upon. Clearly we could extend this to other aspects of planning, but the suburban housing field is particularly pertinent because planners are engaged in this in both a professional/production and personal/consumption capacity.

However, Bourdieu provides us with a constrained opportunity as, while he exposes the working of power through fields, he also indicates that the deployment of capitals and habitus in a field renders the already powerful, powerful. But by exposing how power can seemingly turn taste into objective fact Bourdieu's method promises at least the potential to challenge and disrupt this process. In practice this could facilitate a more reflexive planning for the city and its suburbs as we are more able to expose and challenge 'within-planning' power relations. Is this a call to leave the suburbs alone or even to encourage them further? No. But a more reflexive planning for the suburbs would seek to engage in far greater depth with the fine grain of suburban experience and would do so more effectively by being conscious of the blurred line between judgement, taste and fact. Planners may still seek to intervene and to guide change in suburban areas but from a position more attuned to power interests within the profession and so more respectful of the potential as well as the limitations of suburban forms and societies.

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