

# The suburbs remain a poorly understood part of London

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*For many, the word “urban” is synonymous with high-rise buildings, financial and cultural centres and inner-city life. But this ignores the existence of the suburbs. In his new book [City Suburbs](#), Alan Mace explores how suburbanites interact with the city and calls for the suburbs to be better integrated into studies of the city.*



My call is to include the suburbs in the story of the city and not simply to hive it off as a sideshow. I don't want to make a special case for suburbs, but people interested in cities would benefit from remembering that the outer city is there. We are increasingly fascinated with the city but it tends to be with particular parts of particular cities. The burgeoning mega cities of Asia and Latin America fascinate us with their stunning growth. Their density is captivating and seems to signal the future in a way that New York once did, or still does. We are also rightly fascinated by a kind of virtual density as agglomeration leads to the concentration of high end economic functions in the centre. World city cores are home to the masters of the financial 'globalverse'. But what about the rest of the city?

We all have a conception of what the suburbs are in the UK because if we don't live there the TV tells us. For decades the TV and suburbs have been intertwined, with the TV providing a reflection of the semi-detached suburban life. 'The Office' provided the ultimate slice of suburban working life. But the persistence of one dimensional stereotypes lead to simplistic views of the reality of living in suburbia. In turn, this produces a tunnel vision view of the city.

## Adjusting to change in suburbia

The suburbs are places of change and contestation alongside the city core which are all too easily overlooked. So what is life actually like in the outer city? I have been looking at change in outer London and at how different groups are impacted in different ways.

For example, suburban residents are not all reactive to change. In Northwest London I found that white residents who are now a minority in a predominantly Indian-British suburb were accommodating of the change in the area. This was a self-selected group, they had chosen to remain. Most reported an acceptance of the new character of the area, although sometimes it was an ambivalent acceptance of change. Concern with physical change was held in common; this included the impact of traffic, new blocks of flats and a general sense that the amenity of the area was in decline.

Other evidence shows that the city is starting to turn inside out socially. The desirability of the suburbs is in decline as the inner city is becoming more attractive. Work by The Centre of Analysis of Social Exclusion at LSE indicates a [relative increase in poverty](#) in outer London between 2001 and 2011 and a relative decrease in inner London. Various other data including education qualifications and employment also indicate a lessening of suburban advantage. We need to be careful here as in absolute terms there is still more poverty and disadvantage in inner London, but the relative gap is closing. An older survey for [Ipsos MORI](#) in 2008 showed that in absolute terms residents surveyed in inner London were happier with their neighbourhood and local council than those in outer London

My work also indicates that individual suburbs are deeply impacted by their own legacy. In short, richer suburbs tend to manage change better than poorer ones. A practical example is linked to the semi-detached house itself: where garaging was built to the side on a wide plot there is less need to pave over front gardens or to park on the street. In poorer suburbs the greenery of the front garden has largely been lost to off street parking. In places such as Romford, the presence of former industrial sites and large public buildings including hospitals has provided brownfield sites which are favoured for new apartment blocks. The truly leafy residential suburbs such as Bromley tend to have fewer ex-industrial sites to convert to new housing. In other instances landscaped public parks, a legacy of eighteenth century country mansions, add value to areas such as Beckenham and Southgate. In contrast, areas originally built for sale at a lower price remain more affordable and more open to buy-to-let investment and the immigration of new residential groups.

### Winner and losers in the suburbs

If the suburbs are all so different can we talk about them as if they are a single place? I argue we can because suburbanites all interact with the inner city. It is this relationship which interests me. Residents in different suburbs have quite different interactions with the rest of the city. I use the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu to help explain how city – suburb relations are advantageous for some residents and disadvantageous for others. Bourdieu argues we use our physical and social assets to seek social status; think Ford Mondeo versus BMW 3 series. Where we live, as well as what we drive (or don't drive), what we wear, our education and friends, our choice of music all improve or diminish our social standing.

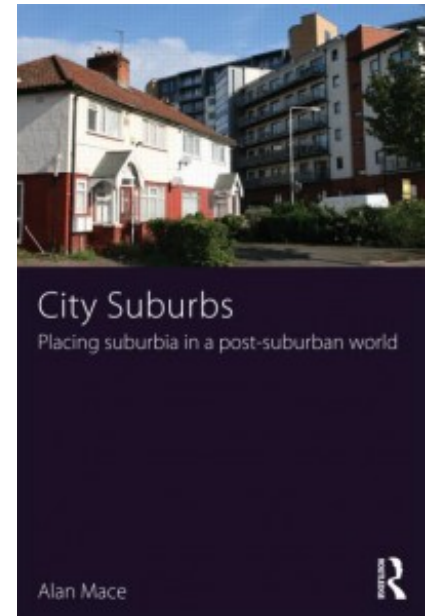
These judgements of taste can be instinctive and deep. There's something in our cultural DNA that tells us that the suburbs are not hip places to live; Bromley and Barnet might be green, leafy and pleasant but they don't have the cachet of Battersea or Brixton. For middle class residents, the suburbs provide relatively poor status compared to life in gentrified parts of the inner city. But this disadvantage is offset both through high status employment in the city and by accessing elite high culture in the centre, *national* theatre, museums and so forth. For residents in more marginal middle class suburbs family links are stronger whereas work colleagues are a greater draw in higher status suburbs. Residents in marginal middle class suburbs also tend to socialise locally more and access 'high' culture in the centre less.

I conclude that place and personal characteristics work together to reinforce differences between the suburbs. Neighbourhoods that were originally built to lower standards are generally faring less well, in part because they have a legacy of lower amenity and also because they are more open to change. This is reinforced by residents' characteristics; in general, residents in lower status areas do not use the cultural or employment offering of central London in the same way as residents of wealthier suburbs. Residents in high status suburban areas tend to use central London as an asset to add value to where they live. But in marginal middle class areas it is more a threat, a bringer of often unwelcome change.

Boris Johnson's initial election as Mayor of London in 2008 was depicted as a battle between the ignored suburbs and the centre. Whatever the truth of this, the suburbs remain a poorly understood part of the city.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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