

# Book Review: Suburban Planet: Making the World Urban from the Outside In by Roger Keil

**Suburban Planet: Making the World Urban from the Outside In**, authored by Roger Keil, emerges out of an eight-year research programme on global suburbanisms to explore the diversity of suburban forms worldwide, as well as their historical trajectories, governance and infrastructure. This is a concise and well-structured contribution to urban studies, writes Jenny McArthur, that shows how understanding the everyday practices of suburbia and their role in urbanisation will be crucial to the cities of the future around the world.

**Suburban Planet: Making the World Urban from the Outside In.** Roger Keil. Polity. 2017.

Find this book: 

In 2008 the world entered the [urban age](#) – but high-level statistics showing half the world living in urban areas conceal much of the global reality. Despite the frequent depiction of hyper-dense centres such as Hong Kong, Manhattan and the City of London, [global trends](#) toward urbanisation are in fact driven by suburbanisation.

*Suburban Planet: Making the World Urban from the Outside In*, by Roger Keil, arises from an [eight-year research programme](#) on global suburbanisms. *Suburban Planet* explores the diversity of suburban forms, shaped by historical trajectories, governance and infrastructure, and reasserts the importance of politics across each of these spheres. The book is a concise and well-structured contribution to urban thinking, showing that the challenge of urban growth is not only a scalar issue, but also a transformation of the ways we live and work in cities.

*Suburban Planet* takes a different approach to popular critiques that lambast suburbia as an essentially problematic or [banal urban form](#). Suburbs are not treated as normatively good or bad – they're simply what we have, and researchers must understand their complexities if we are to seriously address the challenge of supporting sustainable, inclusive and resilient urbanisation. This perspective also echoes the call of Andy Merrifield (2002) to dispense with 'old chestnuts' that create unhelpful dichotomies between the Global North and South, developed and underdeveloped, city and suburb. *Suburban Planet* therefore puts forward a series of arguments on spatial development and everyday practices in suburbs. In so doing, it contributes to the ongoing debate on [reconstructing urban theory](#), positioning an alternative perspective to the [planetary urbanisation](#) thesis. It offers more questions than conclusions on urbanisation, but is nonetheless valuable to inform research agendas and methodologies.

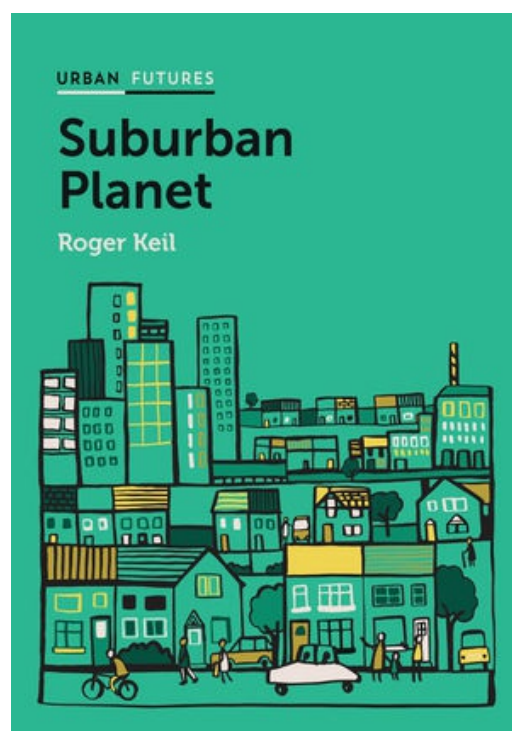




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The perspective set out in *Suburban Planet* outlines the distinctive forms of suburbanisation at play and draws connections with infrastructural technologies and the political economy of urban development. The book is structured as a combination of conceptual, thematic and historical chapters, focusing on suburban processes through the categories of governance, land and infrastructure. The initial chapters explore suburban theory and empirical approaches to the suburbs, followed by in-depth case studies comparing the US suburbs of Lakewood, California and Ferguson, Missouri. These cases show the contradictions apparent, even within cases of North American suburbia: cities are often characterised by the historic paradigm of ‘white flight’ and segregation, overlooking the ongoing reworking of suburban areas. Ferguson presents a new type of suburb, no longer identified by the ‘self-controlled boundaries or lifestyle preferences’ that initially defined suburbia. Instead, Ferguson is poorer, more diverse and, as shown by the [2014 shooting](#) of Michael Brown and [2014-15 protests](#), the site of police brutality and widespread unrest.

The suburban lens reveals the complexity of urbanisation with greater clarity. Suburbs created the imperative for metropolitan governance as a fix to manage the mutual dependencies between city centres and newer suburban areas. The suburbanisation process reflects larger political economies, shown through the development of migrant communities and the displacement of residents induced by global capital flows. Cases from the Global South also contest the dominant Western bias in urban theory. Concepts such as ‘desakota’, emerging from South East Asia, unpack the dependence between livelihoods and the local environment. Changing land-use patterns in peripheries of Delhi illustrate that transformations in land cultivation are of equal importance to urbanisation, and cases from China show suburbs that are lagging behind the rest of the city due to the slow delivery of basic infrastructures and amenities. By focusing on the political, economic and technological drivers of urban expansion – not just intensification – suburban perspectives make a solid contribution to resetting urban theory.

*Suburban Planet* is a useful resource for researchers, particularly social scientists interested in cities and infrastructure. The heavy use of geographical terminology – dialectics, discursive processes, worlding, social peripheralisation – means that it is primarily accessible to academics. However, it does have relevance for practitioners, particularly to dispense with fixed ideas of urban form and recognise their narrow understanding of the complex reality of suburban life. The text also critiques practitioners’ ongoing fixation on the city centre:

The urban bias of Jane Jacobs’s recently resuscitated economic writings and the popularisation of Richard Florida’s (2002) work about the “creative class” has contributed to the preferential view of downtown spaces for the talented professions who are considered the drivers of a retooled capitalist urban economy.

As gentrification of central areas continues, ossifying the urban realm through overinflated property prices and the hyperfinancialisation of real estate, the suburbs are becoming spaces of mixing as groups are pushed out of the centre. The diversity and innovation lauded as a central city phenomenon by [Jacobs](#) is being peripheralised to the suburbs, illustrated locally by Suzanne Hall's research on [local high streets](#) in south London.

It also raises pertinent issues for urban governance and planning, questioning the narrow focus on density or intensification as end-goals within planning practice:

Density, or more specifically higher rather than lower density, is a concept that enjoys much love in urbanist circles [...] The thrust of such enthusiasm for density and compactness is easy to understand if not somewhat contradictory as it often neglects the complex problems related to a single focus on an (abstract) concept of density at the expense of other considerations related to sustainability and resilience.

In the book, Keil brings the arguments of Henri Lefebvre into alignment with the current political context in the West and upheavals in North American and British politics. The geographic divides in voting behaviour in the Brexit referendum and US presidential election revealed a backlash by those outside the urban centre, similar to Lefebvre's context in mid-century Paris:

We must now realise that our urban political world has grown beyond the centres. When Lefebvre coined the idea of the "right to the city" as a reaction to the exclusion of the Nanterre students from the promise of Paris, he did not endorse the fetishisation of the decision-making centres.

The message to broaden our perspective away from the centre resonates throughout the book, and continued research to develop the theoretical and empirical implications of suburbanisation holds strong potential. Ignoring the suburban realities of the current phase of urbanisation, as well as the everyday practices of those who live in the suburbs, will be to the detriment of cities in the future.

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**Jenny McArthur** is a postdoctoral research associate at University College London. Her research focuses on the relationship between infrastructure investment, urban growth and liveability. Jenny has a background in civil engineering and economics. Twitter [@jen\\_m\\_mcarthur](#). [Read more by Jenny McArthur](#).

*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*