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Living on the edge: building a sub/urban region

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Abstract

Traditionally the suburbs have been viewed as secondary products of urbanisation, as the necessary consequence of growth emanating from the centre, which has required housing on the outskirts and commuting back in for employment and high end consumption. But it is increasingly necessary to rethink this approach and to consider the implications of positioning the suburbs themselves as more central to processes of urban development and in defining the lived urban experience.

Here, some of those implications are explored with the help of evidence drawn for research conducted on the edge of the London's city region, or what has been called the Greater South East. The research on which it draws was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and focused on the tensions and prospects for housing growth in that area.

The paper highlights some of the uncertainties and ambiguities associated with the new suburbia, as well as charting the way in which it has been incorporated into the wider politics of growth, as a subject of urban policy. It concludes by emphasising the need to acknowledge the importance of the suburbs as a central, rather than peripheral or secondary, aspect of contemporary urbanism.

Introduction

Conventional definitions of the suburbs tend to proceed from two quite distinct but overlapping sets of understanding: the first identifies them as an almost inevitable consequence of patterns of urban development, and often locates them in a ring around a central city; the second (particularly in the Anglo-American tradition) focuses on the suburbs as a way of life, largely defined through a desire to escape from the most intense pressures of urban living. These assumptions have come under increasing challenge in recent years, in the face of a growing recognition that today's urban form tends to be more dispersed and pluralised than the former interpretation suggests, as well as a wider acknowledgement that suburban life is rather more complex than the latter implies..

It is on these shifting interpretations and their implications that this paper focuses. What happens when the role of the suburbs shifts, so that they are no longer interpreted as a response to urbanisation, but, rather, understood to be a defining aspect of urbanism?

We revisit the question of the suburbs and seek to re-think their urban significance by reflecting on the recent experience of development on the outskirts of the South-East of England (the London city region). We do so with the help of research undertaken as part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project on tensions and prospects for sustainable housing growth. This project involved intensive interviews with planners and housing professionals from the public and private sectors, as well as local politicians and community activists, alongside the analysis of planning and other documents. The cases on which we focus are English ones and they are 'ordinary' rather than iconic places, which means that some of the names will be unfamiliar to an international audience, but we believe that the processes we explore are of wider interest. The outer suburbs of the South East are increasingly being reinterpreted in public policy and political discourse as sources of economic dynamism, capable of generating economic growth, and as places whose purpose is to provide the housing for the labour force required to feed the insatiable

demands of the wider economy of the London city region. And a similar rhetoric is becoming familiar in a range of other urban regions across the world.

Setting the context

Traditionally suburbia has been conceptualised through the prism of the central city, as a process of succession has moved residents outwards, commuting back in for employment, but living in the suburbs as a relative haven of security and space, free from the tensions (and maybe also the excitements) of the city. In this context, the suburbs have often been understood as bland, non-places, defined by what they are **not** as much as by what they are, with the dynamism of urban life somehow bleached out of them as reflected, for example, in Gertrude Stein's famous, or notorious, evocation of Oakland – 'there is no there there'. Jacobs (1961) and her more contemporary followers criticise the perceived blandness and homogeneity of suburbs almost as harshly as they do the interventions of the planners in the central city. At the same time, the Chicago school, with its imagery of concentric rings of development, distinct urban functions and migration histories has retained a remarkable (if often unacknowledged) intellectual dominance as a frame for understanding the city (Burgess 1925).

From time to time, of course, there have been attempts to question and reframe these sets of popular and academic understandings. So for example, in their review of Boston's suburbanisation at the end of the nineteenth century, Edel et al (1984) highlighted the active way in which the new spaces were being claimed by an expanding working class, while Gans (1967), focusing on a prototypical post war suburb, celebrates the ways in which its residents actively constructed a new community. For Gans (1968) the point was already, counter to Wirth's (1964) identification of urbanism as a way of life, to argue that suburbanism, too, was an **urban** way of life. And the low density vision of Southern California filtered through a European lens by Banham (1971) may not have been explicitly suburban but it did suggest the possibility of a rather different urban form, while Webber's evocation of an automobile based 'non-place urban realm' directly challenged those for whom place (and maybe even central place) was a defining characteristic of the urban (Webber 1964).

But the dominant critique remained the same. The new urbanists in the US bemoaned the legacy of 'urban sprawl' (Duany et al 2000) blaming the rise of what they called the 'suburban nation' for the 'decline of the American dream' even if their alternative model looked a lot like some English suburbs, while Hayden's more sophisticated critique focused on the political economy of the suburbs and the role of the development industry (Hayden 2003). Her 'Field Guide to Urban Sprawl' (Hayden 2014) powerfully illustrates some of the ways in which the suburban dream has been translated into rather less attractive built form, from, what she labels, 'clustered world' and 'privatopia' to 'boomburg' and the even faster growing 'zoomburg'. In Britain similar concerns led to an emphasis on the urban renaissance as an alternative to greenfield development (Imrie and Raco 2003, Urban Task Force 1999), and the focus of academic research seemed overwhelmingly to be on global or world cities (see, e.g., Sassen 2001, Thornley and Newman 2011) and inner city gentrification (Butler and Robson 2003, Lees 2000, Smith 1996). Even those who sought to celebrate the joys of British (or English) suburbia merely seemed to confirm its status as secondary, as the location in which it was possible to escape from the pressures of urban life, the intensity, insecurity and uncertainty that it generated (see, e.g., Barker 2009, Schoon 2001).

In recent years, however, these understandings have been challenged rather more confidently from three main sources: the first (again) draws on the experience of Los Angeles to present an alternative to the Chicago School, suggesting that it is now the supposed peripheries that drive urban change, rather than the older urban cores (Dear 2000, 2002); the second reflects on the experience of parts of the global South, where new urban developments often owe little to the older urban cores, and what may look like suburbs are better understood as quite distinctive spaces of urban living (Simone 2004); a third draws attention to the *Zwischenstadt* (or 'in between city'), those spaces of the city that cannot easily be characterised in the spatial language of concentric rings (Sieverts 2003). Some have even begun to talk of a post-suburban moment (see, e.g., Phelps and Wu 2011), while others have suggested that we are seeing 'generalized suburbanization', that is the 'continuous suburbanization of our world' in the context of planetary urbanisation (Keil 2013, 9).

Following Keil, it almost appears that the suburban way of life has come to define the urbanism of the 21st Century.

Each of these approaches is helpful and thought-provoking, but what is most important for our discussion here is not only that they open up different ways of thinking about cities, but also that they are a response to the stubborn realities of contemporary urban life. They are not merely theoretical constructs, but attempts to capture the urban experience as it is lived in practice, recognising what is, rather than implicitly or explicitly calling on romanticised and elegiac notions of the 'urban' as a place of community and easy diversity (in the hands of authors such as Young and Wilmott 1957, as well as Jacobs 1961). It is in that context that we aim to explore and understand the emergence of what we have identified as a suburban (more than sub-) region on the edge of London and the South East which is itself a particular sort of mega (city) region (Cochrane 2006, Gordon 2004, John et al 2005). In what follows, we first consider the nature of the wider region to provide a context for the discussion, before turning to some reflection on the lived experience of those living on its edge and finally discussing the way in which these suburbs have been repositioned in the language and practice of planning for growth.

London and the South East as a region of suburbs

For much of the period since 1945 in England it has been taken for granted that home ownership was the route to security – delivering invulnerability, or at least reducing vulnerability, through bricks and mortar. The slogan of a 'home owning democracy' was reflected in the shift in policy that enabled the sale of council houses (that is rental housing built and managed by local authorities) to sitting tenants (see, e.g. Forrest and Murie 1988). And, during the UK election of 2015, while campaigning in Swindon, David Cameron (Britain's Conservative Prime Minister) called on it once more: 'The dream of a property owning democracy is alive and we will help you fulfil it' he said (Maclellan and Osborn 2015). 'Part of having a good life,' he said, 'is having a home of your own, it's not about assets and appreciating values it is about someone standing here with the keys in their hand thinking this place is mine' (Cameron 2015). From this perspective, and with nostalgic reference back to an imagined golden age, suburbs have been imagined as places of safety away from

the threats and challenges of the (cosmopolitan) city, as protected spaces of family houses, gardens and steadily rising property values.

For much of the twentieth century the South East was England's quintessentially suburban region defined through its role as a commuter belt. Popular representations of life in England's 'home counties' well into the 1960s reflect this clearly - men in pin stripe suits and bowlers travelling up to the city or Whitehall to work, while women remain at home managing domestic space. The politics of the region were powerfully explored in the *Containment of Urban England* by Peter Hall and others (Hall et al 1973). Hall and his colleagues highlighted the ways in which the planning system and the greenbelt in particular were used to limit housing development outside areas identified as urban, thus protecting both the property values, amenities and lifestyles of those who were already privileged. In the archetypical case of South Buckinghamshire a combination of planning controls was combined with the positive commitment to shift any development north to a new town in Milton Keynes, so that its green spaces might be protected from the pressures generated by Heathrow airport, and a burgeoning motorway network (particularly the M4) as well as the feared encroachment of an industrialising Slough, which had already been excoriated by John Betjeman in his 1937 poem, as he called on 'friendly bombs' to destroy it (Charlesworth and Cochrane 1994).

More recently, however, the South East of England (or the Greater South East) has been characterised by Hall et al (2006) as a global 'polycentric metropolis' or 'polycentric mega-region', comparable to a limited range of others across Europe. This is a region whose central focus is London, even if it incorporates several other centres. It also means that the greenbelt is no longer as tight a constraint as it once was, as so much development has taken place beyond it. As Gordon et al argue, 'the effective London economy extends well beyond the borders of Greater London, encompassing most of South Eastern England and perhaps some areas beyond, in what is for many purposes a single labour market' (Gordon et al 2004, p. 30). From this perspective (see also Allen et al 1998) London's reach can be seen to spread out more or less organically, gradually and inexorably incorporating and reshaping more and more of the country. In other words, despite its vast geographical spread (incorporating around half of England), this is effectively a London city region.

The area on which our research has focused is on the edge of the London city region, where it shades into the neighbouring regions of the East Midlands, the West Midlands and East Anglia. The uncertainty and fuzziness of its boundaries already reflect some of the ambiguities of suburbia and of the regional clusters that are emerging in practice. The notion of polycentricity seeks to capture some of this, so that while London may remain dominant, within a broadly defined mega city region, that region is in turn made up a series of smaller identifiable and often overlapping regions with their own characteristics and recognisable identities. These are not 'sub-regions' because they cannot simply be positioned within some sort of pre-existing scalar hierarchy but are part of a more complex system of socio-spatial relations, in which regions are being made and unmade (assembled and disassembled) to reflect changing sets of social and economic relations, even if particular regional or territorial identities are often mobilised politically as if they were more or less fixed (Allen and Cochrane 2007, 2010). In that context, the area on which we have focused might be thought of as a (sub)urban region within the geographically larger London City region. The newly emergent suburban spaces can be understood as part of a wider urban system or region but are defined through networks of relations that stretch far beyond any narrow administrative boundaries.

What is emerging does not look much like the metropolitan regions of the past. Nevertheless its existence has been recognised in the various attempts that have been made over the last two decades to find ways of governing it, and of managing its growth. In the new Labour years it was given its own sub-regional strategy, as the Milton Keynes and the South Midlands growth area (Government Office of the South East et al, 2005) and for a time was under the oversight of an Interregional Board. More recently (under the Cameron government) it has been given a different sort of formal institutional recognition in the shape of the South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership (see, e.g., Cochrane 2012, Cochrane et al 2013 for more on the institutional history). We return to discuss some of these policy based spatial imaginaries below, but their emergence does not mean that most of those living in the region actively identify with it and indeed they are likely to be resistant to any such categorisation, as we discovered most very clearly in one of the final workshops associated with our project. As we set out findings focused on the 'region' as an urban or suburban region, we were forcibly reminded by participants from

community based organisations, professional practice and local government that their territorial identity was local and they tended to reject any wider framing, as well as any description of their areas as suburban, even as in shopping, leisure and consumption practice, as well as in travel to work they were embedded in wider (regional) networks

In the case of Milton Keynes (see, e.g. Fred Roche Foundation 2015), as well as Northampton (see, e.g., Northampton Alive, undated), there are claims to a new urbanity – as one local community actor with experience as a senior local government officer commented in interview:

The distinctive quality of MK is growth – it is a growing town capable of attracting a wide range of services and wishing to adopt the latest things very rapidly.

In Milton Keynes (identified by Barker 2009 as a paradigm of contemporary British suburbia) the proportion of the population identifying as 'black African' is now significantly higher than the English average and the proportion of school pupils who have black and minority ethnic backgrounds is close to thirty per cent (Kesten et al 2011. See also Huq 2013 on the contested cultures of English suburbia). These are not the suburbanites of caricature. The growth of the new suburbs means that (as one policy actor interviewed in Milton Keynes commented): "everybody here came here, everyone who is here is a migrant" and she went on to note that has also meant that levels of race associated crime are lower than might be expected for a more traditional urban area with a similar population and a similar population mix (Interview conducted as part of a second ESRC project, *Living Multiculture: the new geographies of ethnicity and the changing formations of multiculturalism in England*, ES/J00676/1).

Elsewhere, some of the ambiguities of suburbia are reflected in the claims made for the smaller (no longer free-standing) towns of the region (such as Kettering, Wellingborough, Rushden and Daventry), even as they are locked into a wider pattern of commuting for shopping, cultural and employment purposes. For many of those who live in them, it is still their separate identity that matters, making claims to forms of community, building on presumed histories and maintaining protected spaces within which to live and prosper. Town centre development is high on the

political agenda, as a means of sustaining these distinct identities, with a stress on the market town legacy as an explicit justification in several interviews and planning documents. This is a vision of (sub)urban development as an archipelago of settlements rather than a continuous urban space, but in many respects it remains a distinctive urban vision. Elsewhere, however, it is hard to avoid the extent to which the new suburban is imagined through a rural lens Murdoch and Marsden (1994) explore the ways in which new developments on the outskirts of towns are presented in the language of village life, apparently going beyond the suburban dream even as the form of development and the role of settlements echoes the suburban model and their insights are also relevant here, and reflected in some of the tensions associated with the development of new housing.

Opposition to housing growth is localised, varying from place to depending on economic, political and social circumstances. Planning professionals sometimes complain about the ways in which residents seek to defend their areas from further development, even where their own housing is of relatively recent origin. They highlight what they call 'nimbyism', that is an approach that resists any development with the slogan 'not in my backyard'. As one planning professional argued to us:

until you incentivise the local residents, there'll always be...nimbies, it's [the] main stumbling block to housing growth, nimbyism make no mistake about that ... because local politicians will always like to listen to their local residents you know...Many people, many residents are not equipped to see the [positive] impact that a development [may have], all they can see from any development coming to their neighbourhood [is] more traffic, infrastructure impact, this, that and the other, They cannot, they haven't - *God forgive me* but they haven't- they are not trained to visual-, they are not trained to visualise, how improved the environmental quality of their neighbourhood would be you know, once the development is built. The first thing they see on paper is this developer coming in trying to impose his will on us, make money, this, that you know, 'there is more traffic on the road'. I don't think they are equipped you know, to look at [wider issues]t.

A professional employed by a housing development company similarly commented in interview:

there are local views and differences. But God forbid anyone wants to build on a field near me, it might affect my view, or I may have to wait longer at a traffic light. That is the Nimby factor.

From the perspective of those living in the areas concerned, matters are often interpreted rather differently, although there may also be a direct engagement with the arguments of the planners and developers. It is also often the new suburbanites who are most active in engaging with the development process – having bought into an area, they have a commitment to maintaining their own position although they may also recognise the contradiction between their own move into the area and their mobilisation to protect it from further development. So, for example, we were told by representatives of one community organisation that:

We did not feel we could oppose housing as such because we lived in new houses. I went along to [local authority] where we showed them a plan we had produced which involved no loss of housing numbers. We had put a lot of work into the plan. But we were told it was not cost effective to straighten [the existing road] and that we were being nimbies because we were trying to retain the park for ourselves but this was not true, we felt it was a good compromise and that we would be listened to. We were told this was not the way modern housing or town planning works. I said the Victorians left parks...We wanted a good piece of green land but not just for ourselves.

In that context they turned the accusation of nimbyism around, suggesting that rather than being a criticism, it was a strength of their position, because they understood the area directly. The community actor went on: 'It's my back yard. You can't be anything but a nimby. If it's not your back yard, it won't affect you'. Despite their own position (living in newly built housing) the vision to which they appealed was a specifically rural one, referring to the example of a particular village and its development as a model:

It has a community centre but not a medical centre. It has a school, a pub, a church and open land. And it can expand gradually. For example we did not object to a development there of 20 houses.

A local councillor called on a similar set of understandings in asking:

Is it fair that a quango should dump 2000 houses and ruin a village environment? Everybody knows everybody in villages.

So, a contrast can be drawn between the high level of community opposition in a relatively prosperous (and quasi rural) area like South Northamptonshire where plans for new housing development in 2005 met with fierce resistance, compared with the response from Daventry and Corby, both towns with ambitions for growth. For a time, Corby's marketing campaigns explicitly identified the town and its new developments in suburban terms as 'North Londonshire', promising commuters a different lifestyle in a green and pleasant land on the edge of the region. Meanwhile, in Northampton much of the controversy was about housing growth in rural/suburban parishes just outside the boundaries of the town while In Milton Keynes growth remains taken for granted, although the assumption is that most of it will take place on the development land available within what was previously the designated new town area, rather than in any of the supposedly more rural settlements incorporated into the local authority area, such as Stoke Goldington and Olney.

While the ways in which people live their lives in practice will be shaped by the new (sub)urban regionalism (in terms of housing, work or shopping patterns), some of the ambiguities and tensions of suburbia are apparent in these stories from the Greater South East. It is easier to identify a changing dynamic from the outside, as it reframes local communities, the opportunities and challenges they face, than it is to identify a new set of understandings that reflects those shifts. There is no simple way of characterising the suburbs as a lived urban experiences, but that merely reinforces the need to incorporate them more centrally into the debates about urban development and urban spaces.

Rethinking the politics of suburban growth

While the new populations and already existing residents of these areas have sought to make sense of the new urban spaces in which they find themselves, sometimes (not always convincingly) calling on distinctly non-urban imaginaries, the same areas have increasingly become the focus of an active urban policy focused on housing

and economic development which is helping to define them as part of a wider urban system. Not so long ago it was taken for granted in public policy (e.g. in the *Sustainable Communities Plan*, ODPM 2003) that sustainable housing growth could be delivered through a series of new developments extending out from urban settlements across the South East of England. Perceived shortages of housing and spiralling house prices led the Labour Government to set targets for houses to be built in each English region. Growth Areas were identified in the South East of England, stretching out from London as far as the Midlands. The sustainable communities plan promised to deliver economic, social and environmental sustainability through a series of carefully targeted nudges to the housing market, working with developers and house builders. The promise brought together jobs, good-quality housing and the prospect of balanced communities. This was a promise both for existing residents (who might feel threatened by the arrival of new development) and for future residents (who would be able to take advantage of the amenities being provided). In principle, at least, it was intended to undermine the arguments of the 'nimbies' at the same time as delivering significant amounts of new housing.

Sustainability was a much publicised objective, with the promise that 'sustainable communities' would be created through better urban design (including low carbon buildings), community based planning and improved public transport. It was effectively a promise to the existing residents of the suburbs that they would be protected from the negative effects of growth (congestion, erosion of amenity and green space) and to the new ones that they would not be left isolated on balkanised estates beyond the reach of shops, services and community facilities.

In this vision, the new suburbs were re-imagined as providing the basis of a market driven utopia, in which major house builders would be freed up to deliver the necessary supply of housing, while the social and material infrastructure in education and health as much as transport for commuting and logistics was to be delivered through public-private partnerships of various sorts (Cochrane 2010). A neo-liberal belief in the power of the market (and house builders in particular) was combined with active state support through planning and infrastructural development. Rather than being a consequence of growth elsewhere, these suburbs and this suburban

region were expected to become the drivers or at least the necessary underpinning of neo-liberal urban growth (see Cochrane et al 2013). But this was a deeply flawed utopia, whose inconsistencies are already becoming all too apparent as spatial and social inequality is reproduced, within and beyond the region.

One of the main criticisms of the policy regime associated with the sustainable communities plan (emerging from communities and local authorities alike) was that growth was 'housing-led' not 'infrastructure-led' – i.e., that housing came without a guarantee of provision for schools, roads and community facilities or even locally based employment to make growth sustainable (or 'palatable' as one senior planning officer put it). In other words, the complaint is consistent with those traditionally raised about suburban development, as house-builders create new estates with little thought for the social and other provision that might be taken for granted in some urban contexts, like those imagined as organic by Jane Jacobs (1961).

In practice the approach taken by planners and developers was to deliver change more or less incrementally (although sometimes the schemes proposed were quite large) through what were called 'sustainable urban extensions' rather than freestanding new communities on the model of the new towns or of garden cities. Despite the language of sustainability, in many respects this is also an approach that directly builds on suburban models, as each new extension incrementally draws on already existing infrastructure (transport links, educational and other facilities), even as it promises to deliver additional support in various ways.

In 2007/8, a crisis in the housing market was just one expression of the wider financial crisis - not only were plans for new house building put on hold, but in most parts of the country – outside London - house prices fell. For the first time in a generation the proportion of the population living in private rented accommodation rose. As one developer commented to us: 'Housing was the first industry into the recession back of 2007, the market dropped off a cliff'. The harsh realities of economic recession made it impossible for the (not so beautiful) dream to be realised along the hoped for lines and the drive to making up new communities slowed, even as new development was more explicitly defined as a threat to existing suburban communities.

In this context, the Centre for Cities has suggested that one way to foster and sustain economic growth is simply to allow and enable housing growth in the outer suburbs of the South East (Centre for Cities 2013) and this found a policy expression in the central government sponsored City Deal proposed for the South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership area (focused on Milton Keynes) which was markedly different from those proposed for other areas, because it was driven by targets for new housing, with little or no reference to the economic drivers apparent in the Deals proposed for other urban regions in England. In other words it implicitly recognised the suburban status of the area – not an economic node in its own right, but having a catalytic role for the wider region. The decision made locally not to proceed with the proposal, was taken not because the model was felt to be wrong but because achieving existing targets was already a challenge and no significant additional government resource was promised.

In the absence of any more active strategy, however, population and labour market pressures continue to be major issues for the London city region, even in an age of austerity. Market responses in London have helped to generate a sharply bifurcated private rental sector, with high rents at the top end for a globally mobile elite workforce and a return to intensive overcrowding and multiple occupation at the bottom end. The market for owner occupied housing has faced similar pressures – with prices rising sharply and the divisions between those living in urban mansions, middle class homeowners paying an increasingly large share of their income on relatively modest housing and first time buyers (as well as those excluded from house purchase by the high entry costs) becoming extreme (see, e.g. Dorling 2014).

On the edges of the South East the debate has shifted, too, partly as a result of the sharp slowdown in the housing market (which meant house builders had little incentive to build large numbers of new properties). Meanwhile new planning frameworks have been introduced, crystallised in the National Planning Policy Framework, (DCLG 2012) which typically shift the emphasis from notions of sustainability to those of viability. Despite some allusion to wider notions of viability (social and community as well as financial) in practice this implies an even stronger market led vision, in which what ultimately matters is the extent to which house builders deem development to be viable for them. Our research confirmed an increased reluctance of developers to deliver some of the infrastructural

requirements of development, or to offer financial support to councils and other agencies to do so – the emphasis has increasingly shifted to the priority of financial viability. As one house-builder commented:

Value and viability drive everything but the planners don't look at this... There is nothing about the word "sustainable" that changes the criteria for development. Unless the public understand what it means it is a waste of time... It is not the role of the house building industry to undertake experiments but for statutory authorities. We build homes.

Another developer was explicit:

There are lessons for all parties. Clear need to ensure scheme viability is centre stage. There is still a problem with delivering major new infrastructure. Development viability is a massive topic on its own. You only have to look at the many schemes across the country that have stalled. House building is not the panacea to make small fortunes as everyone thinks.

Any requirements to deliver sustainability or provide infrastructure are understood to be:

an additional cost item on the industry. It's a given, the industry adapts to the regulatory burden, and it is reflected in the value of the house. Others should comment on whether it is cost effective, is it viable? Will a purchaser pay the additional cost? I don't know, but there is a significant cost of compliance.

As another put it:

Anything like that is a cost on development and the only place they can be borne is from the value of the land. House builders do not make the market. If land values fall back, so that the land value does not add up to meet the costs required, development will not happen.

And the emphasis is on what the purchaser accepts when a property is bought – the 'General public appear to be satisfied with current quality. High satisfaction when they buy but ten years later they may want something different'. In practice, the expectation is that infrastructural provision will follow later as suburban communities settle. Some of the tensions around the making of suburbia were expressed in the

words of residents in the previous section – here a rather different set emerges from the language of the planners and developers. It was assumed that the new model suburbs – the sustainable urban extensions – would be underpinned by a series of investments in social and other forms of infrastructure, as the gains in value delivered by new housing development would be recycled in various ways. The impact of recession and the reliance of the model on persuading (or even requiring) house-builders to contribute in various ways (through regulation, through forms of tariff or other payment) has made that much more difficult to achieve. Housing targets have not been met and infrastructure has often been slow in arriving. The new model has ended up looking a lot like the old model in which housing has been built on the edges of other settlements, waiting for other forms of infrastructure to arrive.

Conclusion

If in a broad sense, the Greater South East can be understood as the London city region, it is nevertheless important to recognise the force of the argument that it is an increasingly polycentric one. In other words, for all London's significance in framing the region in economic, social and political terms and linking it into wider global networks, this is much more than simply a suburban region, in any narrow sense such as a region of commuters to London. Commuting patterns within the area highlight the extent of the connections, even as commuting to London for high end jobs continues to be significant. The location of back office, logistic and retail functions in the urban centres in the area confirm its position within the functional region, but they also help to confirm that region's polycentric nature. In other words, its development can only be understood on the basis of recognition of its position within the wider post metropolitan region.

Greater London's outer suburbs beyond the metropolitan boundaries are increasingly being reinterpreted in public policy and political discourse both as sources of economic dynamism – capable of generating economic growth – and as places whose purpose is to provide the housing for the labour force required to feed the insatiable demands of the wider economy of the London region. But this also means that a new 'suburban' region is being identified – the Greater South East –

and being made up not just through the everyday lives of those resident within it, but also through the practices of the (public and private sector) policy professionals in their plans, some of which have been realised in built form in housing developments and material infrastructure.

New social and economic spaces are emerging, even if they are ambiguous and uncertain, and something significant is happening on the edge of the South East, in ways that require a re-imagination of what defines the urban and the suburban. It is increasingly necessary to move beyond notion of the urban having some sort of defined core, of the drivers of growth being concentrated in the centre and somehow rolling out from there. The experience on which we have focused in this paper, highlighting what it means to live on the edge of a growth region, also emphasises the need to think more actively and creatively about the nature and possibilities of forms of suburban urbanism. These spaces are not simply afterthoughts in a world of spectacular city centre and office development familiar from the skyline of global and wannabe global cities. They are of fundamental importance to any understanding of the dynamics of the contemporary city and its development and to the ways in which people live in it.

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