

## SUBURBS

Lecture by Sir Peter Hall, Bartlett Professor of Planning at University College London and Urban Task Force member, given at the AiH Estate of the Nation conference, 24th May 2000

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Suburbs are my title, and we English - I say English because there may be some Scots here and they're different -- we English tend to be snooty about suburbs, and that is odd because about 80 or 90 percent of us live in a suburban environment, and yet we're writing diatribes about them. The fact is that almost everywhere in this country is a suburb, in the sense that it was once a suburb and essentially still is. In London, Islington and Chelsea are suburbs -- Ealing, Richmond, Ruislip and Raynes Park, which all came in a sequence. London is a city of suburbs as Steen Eiler Rasmussen saw so percipiently 60 years ago, in one of the best books ever written about London. So is Birmingham a place of suburbs. So are all the places you come from.

But we don't like them, or rather if we do like them, most of us are ashamed to say so. The chattering classes, including those who write journalism, have attacked them on every possible occasion over the years. Seventy years ago this was a cause that united people like George Orwell and Clough William-Ellis, not to mention Osbert Lancaster, who produced immortal drawings of the then new suburbs. It was hatred.

This pattern of semi-detached London, not to mention semi-detached Birmingham and semi-detached everywhere else, caused the movement to create the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. We didn't like this kind of development. The 1947 Act was supposed to stop us having any more of this for many people, but of course it didn't stop us doing suburbs, and for many that is a sign that the system went wrong. You hear it over and over again, the message from -- and you are an architects' audience -- the architects, saying, in the 1930s: "We don't like suburbs, let's stop doing them and let's do Barcelona instead."

That is why the Joseph Rowntree Foundation did us all a real service a century ago [1998] by scenting out a very important topic and making it a subject of intense national interest for a few days. Do you remember the report Sustainable Renewal of Suburban Areas, which was commissioned by Rowntree and written by a team from Ove Arup and the Civic Trust? Starting with an attempt to classify different kinds of suburbs, old and new, they went on to look at the question; how far can suburbs be made sustainable? They concluded that many of these 1930s suburbs aren't working well, and are possibly slipping into a cycle of slow physical and social decline. After all, they are now 60, 70, even getting on for 80 years old.

Michael Gwilliam of the Civic Trust, one of the authors of that report, described it at the launch conference through a graphic image of four apples. It showed one sound apple, next door the apple was slightly bruised, the third completely rotten, the fourth black and withered. He suggested that quite large numbers of these 1930s semi-detached suburbs may just be becoming to resemble apple number two.

You may remember many pictures of Gants Hill, an area typical of 1930s suburbs like this one, which were shown in the papers last year, from that report, as really going downhill. A shopping parade like this one [referring to slide] This is not Gant's Hill, it happens to be Carshalton, but the shopping parade going downhill, full of low rent uses, charity shops, vacant units, and the residents full of complaints that the area was going downhill.

It is certain that some of our older suburbs of inter-war period are now suffering multiple problems; bad traffic, competition from shopping centres like Lakeside Thurrock, and the simple ageing of the housing stock, and the fact that some of the housing stock is going downhill because it is not being maintained.

By the way, this is the subject of a brand new Rowntree report -- very important topic. I can testify that this report was significant for us on the Urban Task Force as we began to focus on another report which came from Anne Power, another member of the Task Force.

That report showed us that many parts of our cities, of course, are in fact turning into urban wastelands or are threatening to do so. You will know what they look like, scenes all too common from the train window or from the elevated motorways. Many of these places are actually suburb type places, which are going downhill.

However, there is a problem. I think that the Rowntree report does present symptoms and propose treatments without understanding what is happening. What is happening in our older suburbs is, as I have said, a complex process involving physical decay, the impact of traffic, and changes in the patterns of living and working, differential migration of social groups, upward and downward social mobility, all interacting. It is not surprising that parts of our cities, including suburban East London, are showing signs of incipient decay, given the big job losses that have occurred in the area's basic industries. It would be hardly surprising if that were not the case, given the declines in jobs and the fact that many people are attracted outwards to newer suburbs, out in Essex in this particular case [referring to slide].

One particular reason for all this came in December, from another report from Michael Breheny for the Town and Country Planning Association, which showed the real growth in jobs in the last couple of decades has come, not in the cities, including these older suburbs within the cities, like London and Birmingham, but in smaller towns outside. People and jobs have been moving out of the cities; although the processes are a bit different for jobs and for people. People are moving out and the jobs are chasing the people and then the people are chasing the jobs. Mike Breheny's conclusion is that we should do something rather radical, which is to encourage concentration of jobs at the edges of our cities, edge of city developments, which is not exactly politically correct but might become so.

## EXHIBIT 44: The density gradient

	Units/ Ha.	Persons/ Ha.	Source
Low density detached – Hertfordshire	5	20	Urban Initiatives
Average net density Los Angeles	15	60	Newman and Kenworthy
Milton Keynes average 1990	17	68	Sherlock
Average density of new development in UK 1981-91	22	88	Bibby and Shepherd
Minimum density for a bus service	25	100	Local Government Management Board Sustainable Settlements Guide (assuming that the housing is occupied to capacity)
Private sector 1960s/70s – Hertfordshire	25	100	Urban Initiatives
Inter-war estate – Hertfordshire	30	120	Urban Initiatives
Raymond Unwin 1912	30	120	Nothing gained by overcrowding
Tudor Walters 1919	30	120	Local Government Board's Manual on the preparation of state-aided housing schemes
Private sector 1980s/90s – Hertfordshire	30	120	Urban Initiatives
Hulme – Manchester 1970s	37	148	Hulme guide to development
Average net density London	42	168	Newman and Kenworthy
Ebenezer Howard - Garden city 1898	45	180	Tomorrow: A peaceful path to real reform
Minimum density for a tram service	60	240	Local Government Management Board Sustainable Settlements Guide
Abercrombie - Low density	62	247	Greater London Plan 1944
RIBA	62	247	Homes for the future group
New town high density low rise – Hertfordshire	64	256	Urban Initiatives
Sustainable Urban density	69	275	Friends of the Earth
Hulme – Manchester Planned	80	320	Hulme guide to development
Victorian/Edwardian Terraces – Hertfordshire	80	320	Urban Initiatives
Abercrombie – Medium density	84	336	Greater London Plan 1944
Central accessible urban density	93	370	Friends of the Earth
Holly Street – London 1990s	94	376	Levitt Bernstein Architects
Holly Street – London 1970s	104	416	Levitt Bernstein Architects
Abercrombie - High density	124	494	Greater London Plan 1944
Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood (maximum)	124	494	URBED
Hulme – Manchester 1930s	150	600	Hulme guide to development
Average net density Islington - 1965	185	740	Milner-Holland
Singapore planned densities 1970s	250	1,000	Scoffham and Vale
Kowloon actual	1,250	5,000	Scoffham and Vale

1. The grey boxes show the source figure from which the density has been calculated
2. An average dwelling size of 4 bedspaces has been assumed throughout this table although it should be noted that this is higher than the average household size in the UK.

In any case, the problem now is another one. As well as the renewal of our older suburbs, we have the question, which is a central one I have to address here, what kind of new suburbs? The argument here is that there are two kinds of suburbs you call good and bad suburbs. Bad suburbs are like these in the Urban Task Force report; what we have been building for the last 20 years: low density houses on the edges of a small town somewhere in southern England, clustered into a cul-de-sac, giving onto a distribution road, which all too easily gets gridlocked, and it does not produce anything like a decent bus service.

Good suburbia, in contrast, is what we used to build. [Referring to slides] This is also Norland Estate in Notting Hill around 1850/1860. This is it from the ground. Recently John Prescott and Nick Raynsford extolled these examples saying: "We have got to do more Notting Hills, Bedford Park, Chelsea and Islington in the future". But these examples date from an era before even buses and commuter trains, let alone cars, and what we really should be looking at is examples that came a little later.

As I said, Chelsea and Islington and Notting Hill were built as suburbs, but the first real suburbs, I believe, were those built around train stations. The first of all of them was Highbury New Park, which dates from the 1850s, the same time as Notting Hill. Thereafter, in the late 19th century, we built huge areas of these railway suburbs of medium to high density terraces or semi-detached houses, all essentially dependent on public transport. The terrace gave way to the villa suburb during the period from about 1830 to around the 1880s, but essentially the densities were maintained. And the important point about developments like these -- Bedford Park, of the late 1870s, is the classic example -- is one that they were clustered around train stations and two that they were built with a relatively high ground cover, which means that the densities, in particular in terms of people densities, given large households then, were really quite high.

What you see in Bedford Park is also what you see in other classic suburban developments like Victorian Ealing, which was developed in the 1880s and 1890s; again round the train station; relatively high densities; all within about 10 minutes walk of the train station. This is a walk from the train station at Ealing, past the shops, into the Arcadian suburb, and once you got into it, this is the kind of ground cover and density you get, in actually what are detached houses in this case. Wimbledon is another classic development. You will find that originally the densities were very high; 13 houses to the hectare, or more, producing people densities of perhaps 200 to 250 per hectare. Also the street pattern is continuously connected, giving close connections onto shops and other services around the train station, and with most of the houses within the critical 'pedshed'.

This diagram [ page 4] from URBED is a very important one. I can't give it proper attention but I do counsel you to have a look at this, because it does show some of the typical densities of Victorian suburbs and early garden suburbs, and shows how relatively high they were in comparison with what has been achieved in the 1980s and 1990s. Now that, I think, will give you some of the possible answers for what we should be doing in the future.

By the way, in places like Birmingham or anywhere else outside London, for the most part you didn't do railway suburbs, you did tram suburbs and then bus suburbs, but the pattern was essentially the same. These were not car-based suburbs, they were suburbs in which only a small minority owned cars; in fact, about 10%, perhaps a bit higher in these suburbs. Looking at those old pictures, look for the cars and the garages; very few cars and very few garages.

Then what we really have is a break. After around 1960 we began to build suburbs on the basis of a nominal public transport system but, because of increasing high ownership and use of the car, that system has eroded away. And the problem is that we have been building suburbs that will not support adequate public transport. It is this very large scale de-concentration and diffusion out of the cities into the small towns, and out of the small towns into the villages, which you see classically on a huge scale in south east England, on a smaller scale around our other big conurbations.

It is this that has created the present dilemma. It has created a new kind of English urban landscape, in which everyone, men, women, employed, unemployed, old people, children -- everyone -- find themselves completely car dependent. The kids are ferried to school and to see their friends; the old depend on a taxi service to get to the superstore; two earners leave the house, in different directions, by two different cars. Don't get me wrong. We can't commute reverse trends. We can't strip people's cars away from them. But we have to decentralise in a different way.

So where do we go from here? With the aid of one of the world's most effective planning systems -- and it really is an effective planning system -- we managed to produce an extraordinary suburb with optimal result. Doubtless the planners were trying to resist every inch of the way, and caved in under pressure from commercial sources and from social pressures. We know from every study that people really want, in this country, to live in villages and small towns, and they regard suburbs as a second best, and they hate cities. That is what we should all remember, including members of the Urban Task Force, like me. So we have to find out a way of squaring the circle and producing good suburbs. I believe we can.

In the Urban Task Force report we tried to set out the basic principles. First of all, returning to those suburbs of the 1930s that the architects hated, these were built around tube stations at around 12 houses to the acre, 30 to the hectare, and you see the pattern here with feeder bus services. Compare the kinds of very low densities we have been producing. The average overall density of housing development in terms of units per acre is as low as 23 in the south east, 25 nationally. And we are arguing that it should go sharply up to 30 plus, and that has been generally accepted by the Government in the new PPG3.

Onward now to the principles in the Task Force report, which were partially applicable to urban regeneration but equally applicable to new-build, and the idea is very traditional. Traditional neighbourhood units within working distances of bus stops, and then these feeding into some kind of radial public transport line, bus or light rail, or even heavy rail in certain circumstances; mixed uses, including shopping and services around these key interchange points between the feeders and the main radial service, and extending onwards on the basis of a hierarchy of transport.

Every book has always said how to do this, and there are places in the world that still are doing it. A week ago I had the remarkable experience of being in Cuteva in Brazil, which must be the most advanced city in the world in terms of innovation, and they certainly have found out how to do it there with buses. Every British planner should have a subsidised trip to Cuteva to see how to do it.

Over in California, Peter Calthorpe, the architect planner, has produced this remarkable notion of transit oriented development, which are essentially clusters of small usual type developments around public transport stations. The same principle in a way for greenfield as the Task Force was advocating for brownfield or suburban extensions. The idea once again is that within this boundary -- we call it pedshed; a 10-minute walking distance, about 2000 feet, about 700 metres -- you concentrate the development with, again, services around the transit stop.

At Lacuna West, south of Sacramento, he designed a whole new suburb around these principles. Tragically the whole design got messed up in the depression of the early 1990s and the scheme was completed not at all in the right way, but you see remnants of it there. If you care to travel to California, do go and see it.

Also here in England, the Town and Country Planning Association have been advocating exactly the same principles to Calthorpe in terms of public transport oriented development. So we have, I think, the principles. We need first of all to make public transport more attractive and driving a bit less attractive. We need congestion charging which, thanks to Ken, we are going to see in London very soon. We need charges to park at the work place; likewise we will see these in London; couples perhaps with free travel card access to buses and trains. That way we can affect people's choices in transport at the margin. We need to be realistic. Again we can't put history into reverse. We can't return to the railway age, let alone the pre-railway age, although we are going back a bit -- 25% increase in rail passengers in four years is not bad -- but what we can hope is to slow the growth of car traffic and car dependency, and that could improve the quality of people's lives, not least those of our children.

We know how to do it. We know they're doing it in the Netherlands, and we're going to hear in a few minutes from Kees Christiaanse about the Netherlands. The Netherlands are doing brilliant suburb-type developments. We can do the same. We should learn from the Dutch in particular, because they are like us in that they have similar lifestyles and living preferences.

How do they do it? By much closer intervention in the form of urban master plans, which effectively provide the brief for the developer rather than open ended plans that leave it all to the developers, as usually happens here. Also, through much tighter co-ordination of land use and transport policies than we seem to have achieved lately.

All this needs more study, as I am bound to say as an academic -- please give us more money for research. But seriously, it also involves making land use plans that positively encourage people to use public transport rather than actively discouraging them using public transport. If they can do it in the Netherlands, and Cuteva in Brazil, we really ought to be able to do it here, in and around our English towns.

In fact, the major lesson I want to leave with you this morning is that we need to become much more positive and prescriptive in our planning of new residential areas. It is time for planners in particular to shed their massive accumulated inferiority complexes, which the Prince of Wales and others have given to us, and then get stuck enthusiastically into some real planning again.

It also means that planners and architects have got to come together in learning how to do urban design again. The divorce between the architects and the planners in a school like the Bartlett School Of "Architecture and Planning" is extraordinary, and, I believe, in every similar department. We do not get together. We are not coordinating our educational schemes. RIBA and RTPI need to work on this. I know you, Paul [Finch], are very much committed to this and I hope CABE will take a lead. It does depend on us training a new generation of architects and planners to come together to rediscover the art of three dimensional urban design, which we did so brilliantly for 60 or 70 years in those railway suburbs and the following garden suburbs between 1850 and 1914, which culminated in gems like Bedford Park and Hampstead Garden Suburb. We led the world then in urban design and we can lead the world again, but it is going to need a very serious and co-ordinated effort.