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Suburbia

Socially Sustainable Suburbia: Addressing a Puzzling and Multifaceted Issue

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Abstract

This issue links the concept of social sustainability with suburbia. It emphasises the multi-disciplinary, yet, insufficiently defined character of 'socially sustainable suburbia' and engages in a cross-disciplinary dialogue in order to overcome the remaining, predominantly negative connotation of suburban development.

Index terms

Keywords: social sustainability, suburbia, suburbanization

Full text

- 1 Social sustainability in suburbia has experienced a significant renaissance since economic changes and crisis-related social dynamics refocused attention on suburban developments. Yet, though socially sustainable suburbia which defines the focus of this timely themed issue is a current phenomenon in need of more academic attention, it struggles to find a common conceptual denominator. The concept remains mired in apparent “*conceptual chaos*” (Vallance et al. 2011: 342). This thematic issue of the Journal of Urban Research deals with an apparently irreconcilable binomial, since suburbs are usually considered as “*roadblocks*” to sustainable development (Hanlon 2015: 133). Further, the notion of suburbia has been conventionally affected by a somewhat negative connotation underpinned mostly by North-American literature on sprawl (Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck 2000).



- 2 Supported by a deliberate identification of the term suburban with an “anti-urban” perspective (Stevenson 2003: 126), the ‘stereotypical’ suburb will display a lack of social diversity and sense of community together with an unsustainable way of living. Therefore, the “*suburban question*” (Kirby and Modarres 2010: 114) is “*whether postwar suburbs are environmentally and socially sustainable, whether they are fountains or deserts of social capital and social cohesion*” (Walks 2013: 1472). Recent literature has reconsidered the traditional idea of suburbia that has predominantly focused on the role of single-family housing as the residential suburban icon. More importance has been placed on sustainable alternatives to the conventional model, such as the integration of a relatively dense type of housing in mixed-use post-suburban settlements (Adelfio 2014).
- 3 This themed issue addresses the idea of social sustainability, which may fairly be described as the weakest pillar of a broader sustainability concept (Lehtonen 2004). More often than not, the concept of suburbia takes an environmental perspective, leaving aside economic and, above all, social aspects of suburbanization. Still a somewhat fuzzy and ill-defined concept, a wide range of authors have defined social sustainability in varying ways. This is, for example, demonstrated by Colantonio (2008), who emphasizes its blending and multifaceted character, Hamiduddin (2015), who touches on the spatial definition of social sustainability by focusing on the neighborhood scale, and, not least, the broad-ranging literature reviews provided by the authors contributing to this issue. From the perspective of urban development, social sustainability may be defined as a type of “*development (and/or growth) that is compatible with harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population*” (Polese and Stren 2000: 15-16).
- 4 Other researchers, such as Magee, Scerri and James (2012), underline the methodological challenges in measuring social sustainability and suggest community-oriented assessment as an adequately accessible approach. Colantonio (2009: 897) highlights the complexity faced in identifying reliable social sustainability indicators that integrate “*multidimensional and intergenerational issues*” stemming “*from a deliberative and reiterative participation process involving a wide array of stakeholders and local agents*”. Such complexity becomes evident when he compares the characteristics of social sustainability indicators with traditional social indicators (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of Traditional Social Indicators and Social Sustainability Indicators

Traditional Social Indicators	[Emerging] Social Sustainability Indicators
Static	Intergenerational and incorporating uncertainty
Predominantly quantitative	Hybrid
Product	Process
Descriptive	Strategic
Mono-dimensional	Multi-dimensional
Target-oriented	Principles and objective-driven
Top-down selection	Deliberative and reiterative selection

Source: Colantonio (2009: 896).

- 5 However, the apparent “*conceptual chaos*” that undermines “*the term’s utility*”, as Vallance et al. (2011: 342) circumscribe the current state of the art, calls for a more focused approach on socially sustainable suburbia. Against the background of conceptual chaos, the task of actually creating a socially sustainable suburban



environment appears even more challenging. There has to date been little research analyzing social sustainability in suburbia, the focus instead being placed on urban areas (Manzi et al. 2010) or exploring highly specific aspects of the issue (Brewer et al. 2014).

6 For this reason, we suggest a multi-disciplinary and sufficiently open-minded approach to exploring social sustainability in suburbia, acknowledging the concomitant existence of diverse and multi-faceted perspectives in this themed issue. The contributions not only demonstrate the adoption of wide-ranging inter-disciplinary views and scholarly perceptions on socially sustainable suburbia, but also examine the concept across all geographical scales and contexts. As such, the contributed articles provide an exciting variety of potential meanings of socially sustainable suburbia. They reflect fascinatingly on the state of the art from a broad range of academic backgrounds and disciplines, speaking to one another by exploring exploitable intersections and overlaps for our better comprehension of the future of socially sustainable suburbia. Some authors address this theme from the perspective of a specific discipline (e.g. urban design), while others adopt a more holistic or hybrid approach, with all contributors offering convincing reasons for their choices.

7 The following examples of papers in this themed issue represent views from the field of *urban design* and an evidence-based descriptive approach, i.e., examining already existing physical features of suburbia- or more speculative design. Serrano-Estrada, Nolasco-Cirugeda and Martí (2016), for example, examine sociability in suburban contexts from an architectural angle. They provide interesting insights into a range of specific features of the Costa Blanca (Alicante, Spain) that affected suburban development dynamics in the context of a region mostly renowned as a leisure and tourism destination. The authors' analysis relates parameters such as complexity, density and the configuration of open spaces to suburbia, prioritizing physical and tangible aspects of development over purely socioeconomic ones. A notable feature of their work is the innovative use of data obtained from the Google Places API, processed through a self-developed desktop application.

8 The highly original paper by Williamson and Kühl (2016) in this issue adopts an urban design approach to propose solutions for retrofitting suburbia. The authors present a case study from Long Island, US state of New York, that focuses on new public participation approaches in the "Build a Better Burb: ParkingPLUS" competition. Their contribution demonstrates how 'speculative design' can set an example to provide a starting point for subsequent changes in the physical structure of suburbia. At the same time, the authors convincingly highlight the positive impacts on and reactions by local planners and local media to such 'alternative' design proposals, which may be viewed as a valuable resource and model for the implementation of local policies.

9 A second approach represented in this themed issue takes into account the specific, unique development of suburbs, framing 'suburbia' as a particular *historical phenomenon*. Montgomery (2016), for example, uses a historical narrative technique to analyze a suburb in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, which was affected by the terrible earthquakes at the beginning of this decade. The suburban area in question was conceived in the 1950s as a public-led project, though replicating the typical features of private-led middle-class suburbia. Montgomery enriches his narrative through theoretical references to the concepts of social capital and social sustainability, thus offering an innovative way to bridge historical with social embeddedness approaches, without which contemporary suburban development would be barely comprehensible.

10 Last but by no means least, Rikke Stenbro and colleagues in this issue (2016) use an intriguing *mixed, or hybrid, approach* to explore the intertwined issues of social and cultural sustainability applied to suburban densification in Oslo, the Norwegian capital. The authors' research makes extensive use of multiple methods, including text analysis, historiographical analysis and survey techniques, from which they derive meaningful implications and recommendations for policy-makers.



- 11 The articles' specific appeal lies in their calls to overcome the conventional negatively stereotyped idea of suburbia, as mentioned at the beginning of the article. This theme gains further prominence as the combined interdisciplinary scholarship in this issue all come to similar conclusions, showing as a whole that the so frequently negative connotation of suburbia needs to be rethought, reframing suburbia as an evolving environment with diversified nuances and often generating both positive and negative outcomes. Therefore, instead of positioning 'urban' and 'suburban' as realities displaying contrasting principles, there is much space and need for a more open debate on the integration of social sustainability in suburban environments. For this very reason, Walks (2013: 1485) argues that "alongside neo-liberal suburbanisms, exclusionary suburbanisms and auto-mobile suburbanisms, there is the potential for diversifying suburbanisms, innovative suburbanisms and suburbanisms of progressive collective mobilization". The articles in this issue all examine novel elements and inspirational ways of alternative thinking about socially sustainable suburbia, with great potential for future research.

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Marco Adelfio is an Urban Planner with a strong interest in Urban Geography. Marco received a PhD in Geography from the Autonomous University of Madrid and, before, a MSc in Territorial and Environmental Planning from the "La Sapienza" University of Rome, Italy. His research deals with compact cities, housing, sprawl and anti-sprawl policies, mixed-use development, densification and suburbia. In the past he worked in Madrid as a consultant, dealing with large clients such as the Bank of Bilbao (BBVA), the National Agency of Spain for Land Development and Endesa - a leading electricity company in Spain and Latin America. He has recently been appointed as a Post-Doc Researcher at Chalmers University of Technology (Gothenburg), Department of Architecture, starting in 2016. Email: adelfio@chalmers.se

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