

The timeless and validity concept of the suburbs

Francisco Barrocas Lourido

Francisco.barrocas.lourido@gmail.com

Architect urbanist, PhD student in Architecture – Urban Dynamics and Forms, Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto (FAUP); Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura e Urbanismo da mesma instituição (CEAU-FAUP)

To cite this article: LOURIDO, Francisco Barrocas – The timeless and validity concept of the suburbs. **Estudo Prévio** 1. Lisboa: CEAU/UAL - Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, 2012, p. 17-34. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Available at: www.estudoprevio.net].

Creative Commons, licence CC BY-4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract

What type of landscape would we draw if we were invited to draw the suburbs? Which people, houses, streets would be part of that drawing...? How would they be placed in space? How far would they be... which reference point? It is true, in a way, “everyone knows when you speak of, for example, the square, the market, the shopping centre, a public space, etc.” (Henry Lefebvre cit. Guerra, 1987, 113)... But what do we know when we speak of the suburbs?

The question is extremely important. Planning is to know, classify, name and decide according to categories – operational categories. Considering the history of the *suburbs* and reflecting upon it rises the issue of the categories holding both the description of space as its classification. Unfortunately, categories do not always correspond to the realities they intend to hold/represent. Is this the case of the *suburbs*? And in which way can it affect the research in this area?

Keywords: suburbs, vague concept, investigation, operative concept.

1. Introduction

The *suburbs* are not a new theme or a neologism. Ackroyd (2000, p.727 cit. Vaughan, et al. 2009, p.2) states that the *suburbs* of London are as old as the city itself. Indeed, the suburbs are not only a phenomenon of modern times as “*the old and medieval cities*” also had *suburbs* (known as such), located just outside the city walls. (Fisher, 1976, p.206)

Its Latin origin, *suburbium* is the result of the combination between the prefix *sub* (meaning, under, close) and *urbs* (alluding to the buildings, the material component of the city as opposed to the *civitas*, the immaterial). It was considered, in legal terms, that whatever was inside the *pomerium* (‘after the wall’), for those who came to town, was *urbs*. Because the *urbs* was generally located on a higher ground than its surrounding area the word *suburbium* appeared. That area, although legally owned by Rome, was not Rome (Witcher, 2005, p.121). Covering a range from 5 to 10 kilometres, the suburbs of Rome had an ambiguous nature: it was both, “city and non-city” (Marazzi, 2001, p.725 cit. Witcher, 2005, p.120).

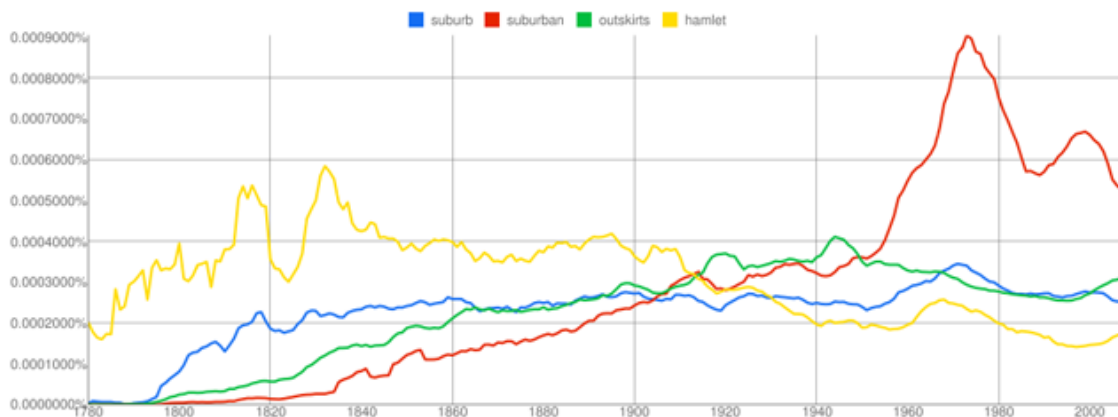


Figure 1

According to the Godefroy dictionary (Godefroy, 1880 - 1895, vol.7, p.585), the term *suburbe* is adopted by the French language at the end of the 13th century and at the end of the 14th century by the English language [*suburb*] (Oxford University Press, 2011). Examining Figure 1 (Google, 2012), since 1780 that the term *suburb* – and later also *suburban* – is used very often in literary works over the years. It is interesting to see that as this happens, words like *hamlet* and *outskirts* lose their relevance.

When we hear of the *suburbs* an image comes to mind of what the word means for each one of us. We can say that there are often great similarities between the images that we individually produce and through those similarities we produce the collective image we have of the phenomenon. It is an apparently defined and identified image with its own characteristics: a category.



Generally, we immediately associate the word to something beyond the city; at a distance, however close. Thus, the image we generally have of the *suburbs*, refers to something quite distinct from the *city centre* in spatial terms, but maintains a one-way dependency relationship.

In this collective conception of the periphery of the city – the category of suburbs – the countryside permeates the city and its suburbs. However, more recently, we also associate the idea of the suburbs to the idea of “non-city”, in the sense that it is an ambiguous space that is not a city or countryside, starting immediately after the edge of town.

2. Suburbs – old (un)known

However, by analysing the collective image of the suburbs in more detail, it may not be as clear as we think. When looking at specific suburban areas, ambiguities and uncertainties emerge related to the common sense of *suburbs*, which compromise the assumptions used for the analysis. Thus, the term *suburbs* summons a set of memories that in the history of thought on *organizational space* (Távora, 1999), are often associated with negative connotations, incompleteness, imperfection, etc.

Initially, the *suburbs* [particularly in the case of London] were connected with a lower, promiscuous and immoral lifestyle, for example with the English expression “*suburban sinner*” (i. e. prostitute, adulteress). In the beginning of the 19th century and in the English language, the word *suburb* was often linked to people with inferior and short-sighted ways. [1]

The fact that some architects gave priority to the *city centre* and considered the *suburbs* as something uncharacterized, uninteresting and unnatural (in the sense that it did not favour the canonical city), is a critical barrier to think about it. Sieverts (2003 cit. Vaughan, et al. 2009, p.7) states: “Indeed, the one-sided love for the historical city is the main reason for our repression of the challenge presented by unloved suburbia.”

Today, generally speaking, the term *suburb* has another meaning. It is understood that it refers to something which characteristics are not enough to be considered as urban. The sub-urban, has a qualitative inferiority, as opposed to the urban.

As in other cases, in the Portuguese case, this ‘unlovely’ for the *suburbs* originates from the disarticulation, and from its apparent irrationality and general perception that these areas are just

“mere piles of unsightly buildings, without personality and life, true dormitories for the important mass population that daily flock to the Capital to carry on their business in it” (Proposta de Lei n.º 14/59 in MOP, 1960, p.11 cit. Nunes, 2011, p. 147).

In addition, it was known that there was an

“intensive construction activity that, as it quickly destroys the traditional expression and beauty of the surrounding villages, it also allows to grow amorphous and uncharacteristic villages that tend to surround the city and suffocating it – deeper

and deeper, as the transportation network that they ask for becomes bigger” (ibid, ibid).

However, it wasn't always like this. It is not kind to think about the *suburbs* as always uncharacterized, because much of it was designed from scratch and with a very architectural and urban quality (Nunes, 2011, p.48). The reasons that sometimes make ordinary people think that the *suburbs* are uncharacterized could be many others. Namely, reasons related to issues of public space maintenance or aesthetic. Unlike the *city centre* – organic, unique and emerging – the *suburbs* were built, in the Portuguese case, in a relatively short time, giving it a great homogeneity in terms of aesthetic in what concerns the building, making it perhaps boring and amorphous as we have already seen. This is not an exclusive feature of the Portuguese suburbs.

Nevertheless, to go against the general feeling, supported by an extensive bibliography, that the *suburbs* are ugly, uncharacterized and ‘*unlovely*’ (Sieverts, 2003 cit. Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.7), we also find an extensive bibliography saying the opposite, supporting its “*loveliness*” (Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.7).

For Portugal, in addition to the heritage mentioned before, perhaps we can establish a relationship between this fact and the publication of the Decree Law 73/73, of 28 of February. In fact, we should not forget that, according to that law, “projects covered by subdivisions of development studies already approved or small subdivisions in rural areas” could “be prepared and signed, alone, by architects, civil engineers or technical civil and mining engineering agents”, the same can happen to “projects for buildings without any special requirements”. In the latter case, if the building did not exceed four floors and 800 per sq meter of construction area, to the point of allowing that their project be prepared and signed by “licensed builders”.

On the other hand, perhaps due to the fact referred earlier and from that time, the care with the design of public space and its qualification may not have been, in most cases, the most elaborate. Given that, except architects, these professionals do not have adequate training to practice Architecture, the probability for this to happen is surely greater.

Architecture of the suburbs

It is necessary and only fair to know that working around the subject of the *suburbs* is also doing Architecture. Fortunately, they are neither few nor recent the architects who have done this over time.

We point out, for example, Raymond Unwyn and Barry Parker. These architects, associated to the *garden city* movement, were also known for adapting this model to the design of the first *garden suburbs*, and Hampstead is usually given as an example for being the turning point. Although Unwyn had already been responsible – during the First World War and among other architects – for designing several similar suburbs, it was Hampstead that gave them – him and Parker – the discredit of some supporters of that movement (Hall e Ward, 2002 [1998], pp.41-42). According to Hall and Ward:



“(...) Unwyn had already changed tack and offended the Garden City purists. When he left Letchworth in 1907, it was to design Hampstead Garden Suburb for Dame Henrietta Barnett. And this effectively split the infant movement ideologically, for though Hampstead Garden Suburb had the appearance of a Garden City and some of its community spirit, it was in every respect a pure commuter suburb; with no industry of its own, it was dependent on a newly opened underground station and was effectively separated from London only by Hampstead Heath” (HALL; WARD, 2002: 41).

Later, the government of Sir Winston Churchill, commissioned Sir Patrick Abercrombie (also an architect), to design the plan in 1944 for Greater London. In it Abercrombie identified and quantified the problem of lack of space for expanding the city, inside the *green-belt* that he defined. Using the model of *garden city* of Ebenezer Howard, his plan would had to provide for expanding the city out of the *green-belt* in “planed” (sub) urbanizations, implanting cities *ex novo* and expanding the ones that already existed (Hall e Ward, 2002 [1998], pp.49-51).

There are also examples in Portugal of *programmed (sub) urbanization*. In Lisbon, the “grand ensemble” of Nova Oeiras, designed by Luís Cristino da Silva and Pedro Falcão e Cunha in 1955, was a pioneer case of this type of large housing developments and was an example of “modelling architecture and urbanism of the modern movement in Portugal” (Nunes, 2011, p.48). Later, we can still identify, among others, the cases of Reboleira Norte (1960), Miraflores (1962), Alfragide (1963), Nova Carnaxide (1964), Santo António dos Cavaleiros, Bairro Augusto de Castro and Alto da Barra, in Oeiras (1965), Reboleira Sul (1966) or the Plan of Telheiras (1971) as examples of this type of intervention (Nunes, 2011, p.47). These examples announced “a new relationship between, on one hand, the urban form and the forms of urban growth, on the other hand, the growth of the automobile as an urban premise” (ibid, ibid).

Suburbs – a term, multiple views

The conceptual (*ideal type*) and personal image of the suburbs is different depending on the individual, the knowledge of the territory, the culture in which it is inserted and the time it reflects on this phenomenon. We will cover some examples of *ideal type commuter* trying to embrace the several existing theoretical realities.

For Solà-Morales (1997 cit. Nunes, 2011, p.72) suburbanization is understood, overall, as “the process of expansion of cities to the outside of its boundaries through forms of urban growth (...) socially differentiated and differentiating.”

Many years before, Ildefonso Cerdá (1992 [1887] cit. Nunes, 2011, p. 150) identified, in his General Theory of Urbanization, four forms of *suburbanization*:

- That is given by the access route to the city, which have to do with restoration areas (resting and shelter for men and animals);
- That is given by industrial reasons, associated with “rejection by the city authorities of the location of dangerous or unhealthy industries in the cities”;



- That comes from administrative reasons relating to tariffs on goods entering the cities, promoting buildings, dedicated to storage and contraband along the borders of the cities; and
- That, simply, is an expansion of the city, which has distinguished itself as an urban “ruralised” featuring a certain isolation, “elegance and arrangement”, where the wealthier classes were located in the search for wellness, convenience and clean air, which was already scarce in the industrial city that was being settled. [2]

Regarding mobility and urban form, Cerdá finds a common denominator to the four types of *suburbs* that he identified: all were characterized “by living from the city in the city. They formed, each with its specificities, places which occupation and main activity could only be possible and developed in the relationship with the city –relationship based on mobility” (Nunes, 2011, p.153).

Thus, it is not surprising that, with the short distance mass transportation – the “omnibus”, the “tram”, the “commuter train” and later, specially, the automobile – the suburbanization process was dramatically accelerated (Fischer, 1976, p.206). However, this process unfolded quite differently depending on the national and historical contexts.

Taking this into account, Fishman (1987 cit. Nunes, 2011, p.153) distinguishes two models of *suburbanization* that were consolidated in the second half of the 19th century: the continental and the Anglo-Saxon model.

Generally speaking and according to Fishman (1987 cit. Nunes, 2011, p.153), the continental and Latin American cities chose to keep a traditional structure and thus the “supply of buildings for the bourgeoisie, as well as an emerging and embryonic urban middle class, tended to concentrate in the central area and in its most recent adjacencies” (Nunes, 2011, p.154). In turn, the advances in urban transportation systems were used to relocate the industry and its workers, for increasing distances from the centre (Fishman, 1987 cit. Nunes, 2011, p.154). In the case of British and North American cities, the option was for the “*suburbanization of the middle class*” (Fishman, 1987 cit. Nunes, 2011, p.153).

“As Robert Fishman states, the suburban transport system quintessentially, the train, served in two different contexts, two directions and meanings to suburbanization: a continental organization associated with the relocation and establishment of the industry and the working class in the suburbs, an Anglo-Saxon organization associated with residence and residential concentration of the bourgeoisie and the embryonic urban middle class in the area” (Nunes, 2011, p.154)

The wide concern about the suburbs was based on the powerful image according to which, for example, the American *suburb* is made of white population, belonging to the upper middle class (Fishman, 1987; Jackson 1985 cit. Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.4; Fischer, 1976, p.232) This stereotype is just one of the many who live in that space, where we also find the working middle class, immigrants, and non-white population (Harris, 1996; Nicolaidis, 2002; Wiese, 2004 cit. Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.4). In the late 1970’s, Fischer (1976, p.207) wrote that more Americans lived in the *suburbs* than in the “*main cities*” or non-metropolitan areas and that the factories, stores and services followed the population and settled there. This, in the long run, meant that each year fewer “suburbanites” needed to visit the “main city” to work, go shopping, to carry out recreational activities. (ibid, ibid)



There is another *ideal-type* of *suburbs*. For Silverstone, (1997, p.13 cit. Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.4), for example, the cultural aspect of the *suburbs* – the cultural space or *hypertext* (Ascher, 2010, pp.46-49) –stands out from the daily experience of the physical *suburban space* itself. According to him the process of globalization [certainly associated with technological development] led to the marginalization of the public space in the *suburbs*. For Silverstone (ibid, ibid) we can only accept its “dematerialization” in a socio-cultural way in which the *suburbs* are a mindset, ubiquitous, insinuating and spreads; a “virtual space” rather than real.

In addition to these monocentric views there are “non-monocentric” or polycentric alternatives from the relationship between the city and the suburbs. Harris and Lewis (2001 cit. Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.7) demonstrated that, for example, since the 19th century, there are in North America multinucleated regions whose origin is linked to the work place. In these places, following the First World War, there was an “urban decentralization” accelerated by the widespread use of the automobile, the deindustrialization and the advances in communication technologies in the traditional urban economies (ibid, ibid). Castells said

“it relies on the formation of relatively dense business and commercial sub-centres, transforming the metropolitan areas into multinuclear, multifunctional spatial structures, organized around... new “urban villages.” (Castells 1989, 156-53 cit. Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.7)

Recognizing this change, Marshall (2006, p.274 cit. Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.7) calls for implementing a non-hierarchical view of the suburban centres given that “the urban gravitational pull is more truly said to be from everywhere to everywhere else.” Further advancing,

“Robert Fishman argues that the history of the American suburbs ends when technological conditions associated to circulation and communication recreated territories that were mainly residential into regions that had potential, and were productive and entertaining. For Fishman, the urban form that began in the 1970’s and emerged from the American suburbs should be perceived as technoburb. With the expansion and dissemination of information and communication technology, the location of economic activities acquires and develops independence in relation to the previously established urban centralities. The territorial inclusion of technoburb is the multi-centred region; a territory structured along the road routes and expanded corridors that can reach more than one hundred kilometres long. Technocity and technoburb refer to the fact that urban functions are becoming more (and more) scattered over the landscape which, as stated by Fishman, are neither urban nor rural, or suburban.” (Nunes, 2011, p.107)

Recently, authors such as Castells, Ascher, Indovina and Bourdin, among others, have suggested the concepts of metropolis and metropolization to account for these and other urban transformations in progress in the last fifty years.

“The key elements of metropolization are economic and technological and will lead to the emergence of metropolis – that is, of vast urban areas which go through several territorial administrative units with a population exceeding one million inhabitants, and part of a network with large urban areas in which they establish complementary and hierarchical relationships in regional, national and planetary terms” (Bassand, 1997, cit. Nunes, 2011, p.77)

In this regard, Indovina (2010, pp.18-19), defines four stages in the metropolization process (which may happen simultaneously in different geographical locations), which in turn introduce new conceptual images of metropolitan areas. According to the author, the process begins with the “urbanization of the countryside” in which the practices have no direct relation to the agricultural activity. Then, these territories go through the “diffused urbanization” stage in which there is a quantitative extension of the previous stage without significantly altering the qualities of this space (maintaining the agricultural use). The next stage is called the “diffused city”. In this stage, the “meaning” of the territory is changed since the non-agricultural deployments continue to increase in numbers and “urban quality services” (shopping centres, collective facilities, etc.) are located in the extra-urban territory. It is also a “dilated city” in the sense that the large settlement territory is used as a city. Finally, the fourth and final stage is the “metropolis territory” referred above.

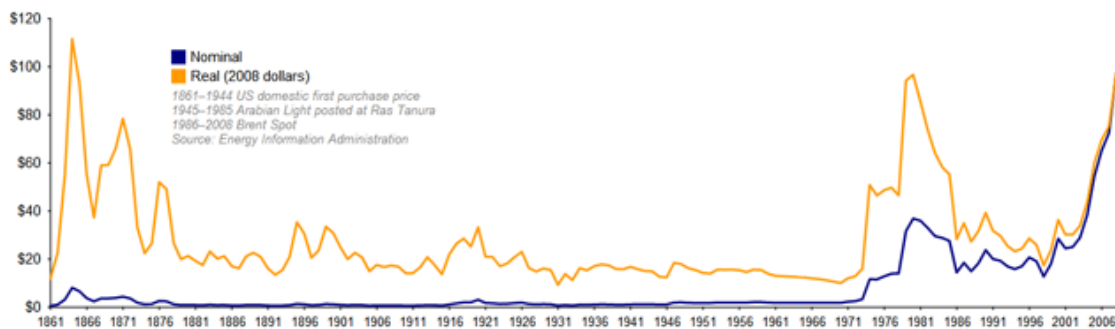


Figure 2

3. Contemporary renewal of interest in the suburbs

It is curious to see the influence that both World Wars had in the debate about the *suburbs*, noting slight decreases in the use of the words *suburb* and *suburban* during these periods and the opposite in the post-war periods [Figure 1]. This is clear in post-World War II, in the peak usage of those words [in particular the adjective *suburban*] that starts around 1950 and culminating around 1973, possibly through the oil crisis [Figure 4]. Also, the ascending phase in using the word *suburban* beginning in the mid 80's [with the falling price of oil] and ending around 2000 [coinciding with the peak in oil prices] seems to be related to energy uses. Apparently, the debate about the *suburbs* seems to have been more appealing in times of abundance of energy and forgotten during the most critical phases in the matter. Is this one of their Achilles' heel?

While being a reflection, the suburbs have been subsequently revisited, both as the object of study, and often, as the ground associated with a diverse set of social problems.

It will be interesting, however, to focus on the reasons behind what appears to possibly be the contemporary renewal of interest in the suburbs, particularly in Architecture.

We will highlight three reasons.

3.1 Diversification of birthplace and residence of architects



In recent years, we have been witnessing a gradual change in the contexts from which the architects come from. It is argued that this fact is not negligible for discussing the reasons justifying the renewal of interest in the contemporary suburbs.

It is clear that the analysis of the contemporary reality of the profession of architect in Portugal reveals the persistence of the phenomena of an accentuated social reproduction. Significant evidence of that is the “endogamy” in the choice and access to the profession (thus referring to “the high percentage of architects with close relatives in the profession”), or elitism and “exceptional closure of the profession (...) in social and cultural terms” (Cabral and Borges, 2006: 119, 34).

However, some attenuation observed in these trends, the increase in the number of degrees and some diversification observed, though faintly, in the social origins of architecture students, are elements that – when combined with the “drastic generational renewal” observed after the 25th of April (Cabral e Borges, 2006: 27, 34) – make the hypothesis of the corollary diversification seem valid, not only the social origins but also the birth places and residence of those most recently arrived in the profession.

Among the data produced under the interesting study we have been mentioning, sponsored by the Association of Architects in 2006, it is worth pointing out the prevalence of a notorious “concentration of professionals in both large metropolitan areas of the country”; in fact, “around 61% of the architects [had] their work place there” (Cabral and Borges, 2006: 29). However, most architects had their places of business located in other areas than Lisbon and Oporto [3].

It is believed that the diversification of the social origins, the birth place, the residence and professional background of architects are elements that cannot allow to (gradually) change the values, norms and representations that define, in each moment, their professional culture (Costa, 1988) [4]. In this sense, and because of the renewed interest in the suburbs, we can say that architects are more sensitive to places that, deep down, they are more familiar with.

3.2 Facing the crisis of orders, the search for “new” objects or the return to “new” objects

It seems likely that the decrease in public and private building orders, usually located in urban centres, led the architects to focus more their attention on territories and objects not traditionally treated by the majority.

In this respect, the non-canonical city, called the informal city, the areas of illegal origin and the ‘city made without architects’ are subjects that gain a place on the agenda of research and practice in Architecture. This happens, sometimes, for the first time.

3.2 The state crisis and the scientific dignification of the non-canonical city

Finally, and most importantly, the renewed interest in the suburbs comes at a time of deep transformations operated on the urban phenomenon and the conditions of its experiences. More specifically, it happens when the ongoing metropolization process, especially in large metropolitan areas of the country, (Nunes, 2007; Nunes, 2010) is connected to the expansion – and discovery, in its scientific dignity – of “urban structures

that do not follow the principles of continuity and readability that were the base for the urban canonical design” (Portas and Travasso, 2011).

In this context, the crises of the orders is connected to a larger crisis, coupled with the inadequacy of some planning tools of the local area and the State’s inability to get financing, as occurred in recent decades, the programming and relevant technical infrastructures of the territory. In this area, the infrastructure, the ways forward indicated include territorial differentiated levels of service (Carvalho, 2011) in order to achieve greater financial rationality and also the environment.

On the other hand, the environment issues, linked to sustainability, derive a number of issues which in itself have served as a theme to thousands of scientific papers. We speak, of course, of issues related to climate change and energy efficiency on various scales – national, regional, local – but in a broader perspective of sustainability, we also speak of issues of equity and territorial cohesion.

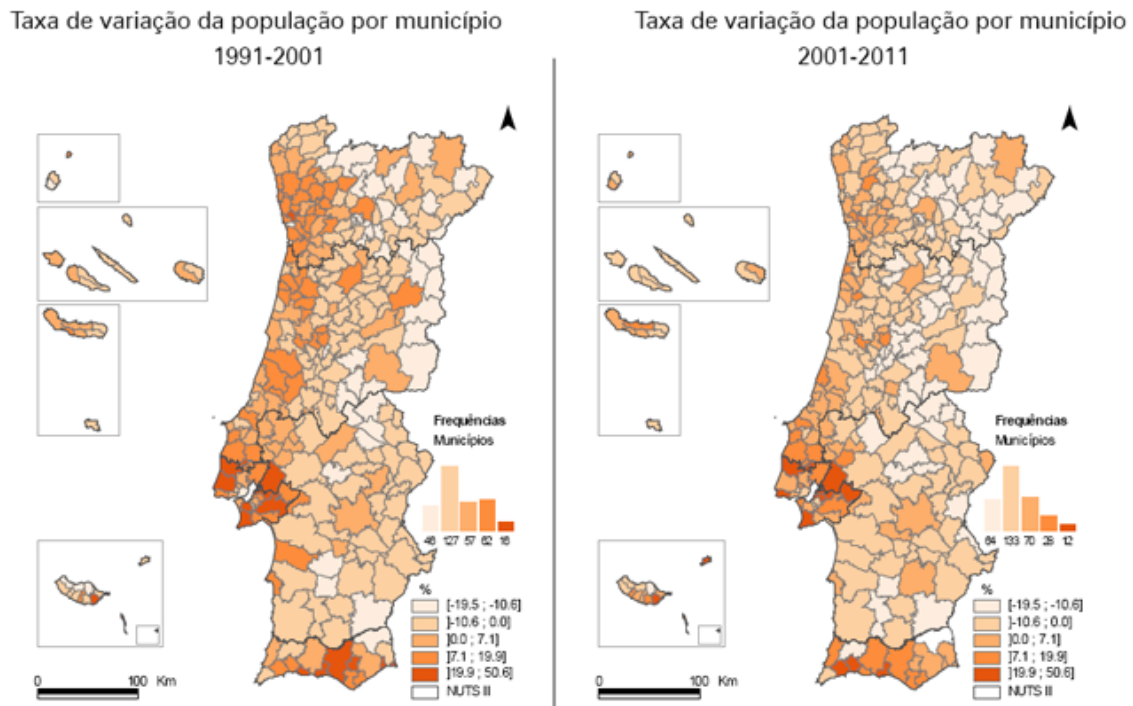


Figure 3

3.4 Is it still the ‘centre’?

It does not seem to make sense today of thinking that the suburbs are less relevant than the rest of the urban territory. In fact, the suburbs supplant the city in some variables.

It is known that, in the Portuguese case, the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Oporto hold much of the population and large number of dwellings and buildings in the country – 42%, 38% and 23% of the national total, respectively (Instituto Nacional de Estatística,

2011), and all this in only about 5% of the area of the country. It appears that this tends to solidify since the rates of change of the population of those metropolitan areas have been positive for the last two census performed.

On the other hand, that is where a big part of the employment is concentrated – 43% of the national total – and most of the production – 52% of the national GDP. Of course, for the last variable, it is necessary to take into account that companies that have contributed the most, in many cases, have a disproportionate territorial expression in employment and revenue [it is curious to see that both values have remained stable from 1995 to 2009] (ibid, 2011b).

However, and in spite of this, it appears that both municipalities that give the name to their respective metropolitan area have lost population consistently over the past two decades, although in a lesser extent in the latter. [Figure 2, extracted from the provisional results of Census 2011] (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2011a, p.8; 2011; 2012, p.6).

With regard to the housing in the metropolitan areas, we can see that the number of buildings has increased in all municipalities, and such has happened in both inter-census periods, with greater intensity in the neighbouring municipalities of Lisbon and Oporto [Figure 3, extracted from the provisional results of Census 2011].

Having said that – and if we think that, on the one hand, much of what many call the *suburbs* are found, mostly, in these metropolitan areas and, on the other hand, that this does not correspond to the main municipalities – we are forced to conclude that the *suburbs* are growing and with consequences with expressions at various levels: social, economical and environmental.

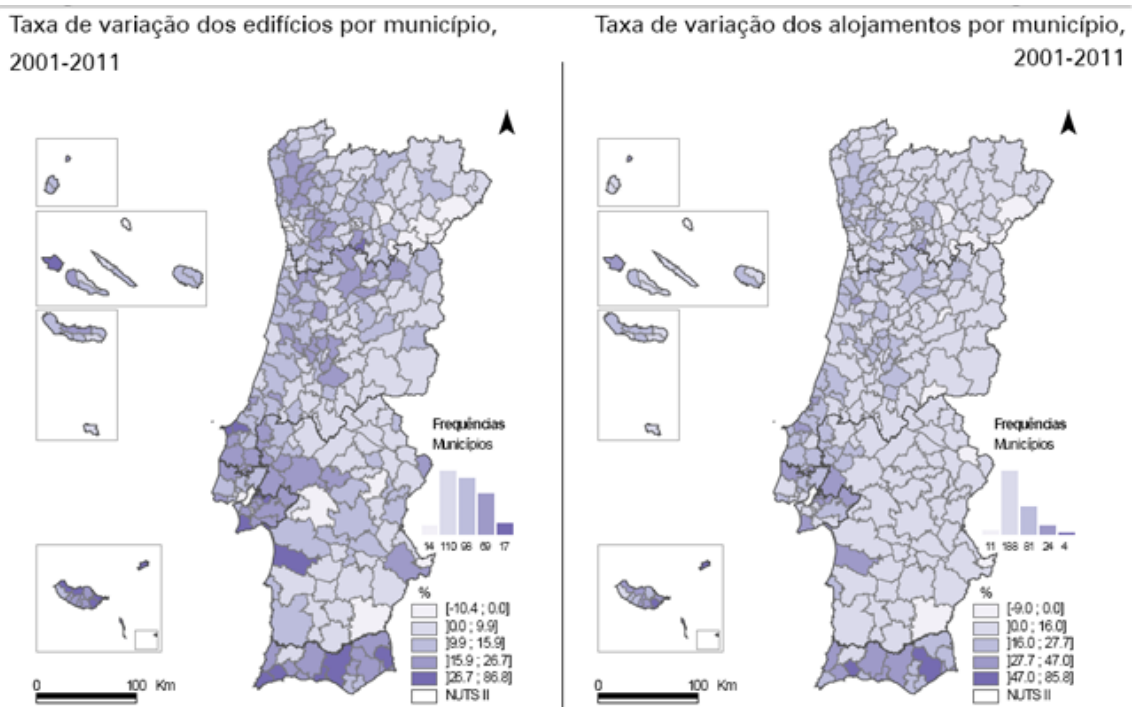


Figura 4

4. Thinking of the *suburbs*

4.1 The term *suburbs* makes sense (?)

The use of the term is understood at some point in history because the old city – organic, canonical, and not planned – expanded, with time, by processes of accretion of new areas with the same characteristics or similar to the pre-existing city. From the moment that the city also began to expand by a process of programmed (sub) *urbanization*, it started by, mostly, using prostheses that alone did not have all the canonical features of the urban landscape. This fact is not enough for these prostheses not be considered as urban areas. This is just a new form of urban expression; as Indovina would say (2010, p.15): “la morfologia cambia mentre la condizione urbana persiste”. We now know that for many these continue to be urban areas, although deficient in certain characteristics. We could then say that there are areas that are urban but not city, but as we have seen there is little consensus.

4.2 *Suburbs*, vague concept

We know that the *suburbs* exist, of course. For example, we know that in 2000, 84% of the UK population and 50% of the USA (in a less comprehensive definition of *suburbs*) lived in *suburban areas*, according to official numbers. (ITC, 2004; Pacione 2005, 87 cit. Vaughan et al. 2009, p.1) The question isn't, therefore, whether the *suburbs* exist; this is evident; it is to know what are the *suburbs*; and it is a big and complex varieties of environments, socio-economic phenomena, ways of occupying territory, morphologies and urban dynamics. Just need to realize that in spatial terms the *suburbs* are all that is not considered city and country, having, as we have seen, characteristics of both.

Fischer (1976, p.232), despite claiming that there is a common interpretation of the term, defines *suburbs* as being made of neighbourhoods that are far from the centre concentration of population and where the resident population chooses to be so based on personal criteria such as, generally, their need of space, commute and financial capacity. Fisher refers to the generic image of the American *suburbs* – with single family dwelling, outdoor space, environmental amenities, all at an affordable price – and its population characterized as being at ease with life, raising children and belonging to the dominant ethnic group (ibid, ibid).

Most of the British studies on the *suburbs* tend to define it according to a variety of planning, socio-economic and cultural criteria (Vaughan et al., 2009, p.3; Fisher, 1976, p.207). While these classification systems advance in understanding the rather wide variety of *suburban* environments and cultural positioning, they are unsatisfactory in the sense that the most current *suburbs* contain elements that are connected to the categories listed. Such systems seem, therefore, rather limited or reducing to the realities they intend to analyze (Vaughan et al., 2009, p.3).

From the conceptual content point of view, the term *suburbs* is, for some, a “geographical space”, for others, a “cultural form” and, still others, a “state of mind” (Hinchcliffe 2005, p.899 cit. Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.2). For all of this, the suburbs are an “elusive” and “partial” concept (Connell, 1978, p.78 cit. Ibid, ibid) and on which a consensus will take time to reach (Nicolaidis e Wiese, 2006, p.7 cit. ibid, ibid).

Most of the contemporary analysis on the *suburban* phenomenon rejects any attempt on an authoritative and tight definition (Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.4). Indeed, authors like Bourne (1996, p.163-4 cit. *ibid*, *ibid*) and Harris and Larkham (1999, p.20 cit. *ibid*, *ibid*) call for acceptance of “pluralism in the investigation” of the suburban phenomenon, in recognition of the existing “diversity of perspectives” and the multidisciplinary in its approach, as an answer to the “surprising complexity of the topic”.

“However, the rejection of orthodoxy in the definition does not eliminate the need for a more substantive theoretical notion of what constitutes the suburbs; but rather what [himself] Bourne refers to as “the growing complexity and inherent contradictions suggested exactly why theoretical efforts are necessary in this sense (Bourne, 1996, p.164). In its absence, attempts to approach the suburbs in general as research area are invariably undetermined by definitions derived from different geographic, socio-economic, technological or cultural that are recommended at a given moment in time” (Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.4).

Well, something so comprehensive, that can be almost anything, can hardly be anything concrete. In this respect Vaughan, et al. (*ibid*, *ibid*) states that “Beyond the most perfunctory level of definition, it is far from clear as to what this term actually means or indeed, whether it can be thought to possess meaning at all.”

It is, therefore, necessary to consider the enormous “epistemological fragility” of the term *suburbs*. (Vaughan, et al., 2009, p.1)

This being said, we can conclude that the term *suburb* is a “vague concept”, a “container word” which refers to different situations, depending on the audience, and thus has “the advantage of allowing everyone a chance to produce their own interpretations (...)” (Bourdin, 2011 [2010], p.22). On the other hand, the use of *vague concepts* in the analysis and understanding of the urban phenomena has serious dangers.

“Firstly because they convey beliefs and convictions, or because their success reinforces this character, antagonistic to a process of questioning and analysis, then, because the very broad nature of many of the vague words makes it easy for a clear statement and difficult (...) to build a detailed reasoning; and finally because they often conceal cognitive biases about which no one questions anymore” (Bourdin, 2011 [2010], p.23).[5]

In fact, in accordance with Bourdin, Vaughan et al. state that:

“The consequence of this fragility is that research in the field of suburban studies risks being undermined by an enduring legacy of widely-held assumptions regarding the ‘essential’ nature of the suburb. Yet such suburban imaginations tend to be derived from historically particular instances, rather than from a consideration of the type of generic problem that the suburb represents.” (Vaughan et al 2009, p. 10)

As such, not being an operative concept, its practical use in understanding and analysis of urban phenomena is reduced.

4.3 Complex reality



When talking about the *suburbs* the question of defining the concept obviously arises and, in this case, since it is something that materializes territorially, of its geographical boundaries. If on the definition of the concept the debate is not conclusive, as to its boundaries there is much less consensus.

The city is now an extremely complex system, geographically extensive and many times diffused. How to delimit the *suburbs*? By a process of elimination; assuming that the *suburbs* cannot be the central area of the city or the countryside? And what is the central area of a city? And the countryside? Is an abandoned urban centre less of a *suburb* than a peripheral area with an economic and dynamic urban activity? Apart from this question, where can we draw the line? This question is also not new. In relation to Imperial Rome Witcher (2005, p.120) states that being the city surrounded by the *suburbs* it would not be easy to identify where it ended and where the countryside began.

As we said, the city is now a polycentric landscape, extensive, continuous and sometimes diffused. Its delimitation, therefore, is not easy. The city is a continuous variation of density, dynamics, flows, etc. The urban landscape is not characterized, as it once was, for obvious discontinuities, easily identifiable, allowing to draw boundaries between the city centre and *suburbs*, with some support in the local areas. In this respect Sieverts (2003 cit. Vaughan, et al., 2009) and Marshall (2006 cit. Ibid) argue that the geographical transition of the urban centre to rural settlement patterns is relative and vary rather than absolute.

What are then the suburbs, how it materializes or, on the other hand, does the concept still make sense? Can we not (should we?) simply just call all of this a city?

4.4 So, what is involved?

Once it is faded (cancelled or even reversed) the discontinuities, territorial, social and economic, that allow to differentiate and establish the dichotomy urban/sub-urban (city centre/suburbs), no longer makes any sense to analyse and operate based on the same dichotomy. Due to the negative charge, the vagueness and weakness of the concept of the *suburbs*, any analysis will tend to become vitiated by prejudice. Consequently, the operative results may also be ineffective and even harmful for the entire urban landscape and including the central areas of the city.

Furthermore, it has long been intended for the urban landscape to be polycentric (European Commission, 1999), with a hierarchy of centres at various levels – national, regional and local. This ambition leads us to look at the land differently. No longer from the perspective of the dichotomy urban/sub-urban but considering the urban landscape as a functional whole, structured, integrated, condensed, with more or less dense areas, with more or less dynamic, qualified or re-qualified. It is not, therefore, to know what is or to differentiate between the urban and sub-urban; *city centre* and *suburbs*: all of this is the city. It is to know how to operate in a complex and diverse urban landscape: how we want to structure the city; where we will contribute to the emergence nucleus, with what qualities, with what dimension, at what scale, in which numbers, with what functions; which are the qualities that they must possess and present urban spaces according to their geographic location and relative levels of service (Carvalho, 2011) to be established for a particular area.

Bibliography

- ASCHER, F. - Novos Princípios do Urbanismo seguido de Novos Compromissos Urbanos. Um léxico. Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 2010 [2008].
- BOURDIN, A. - O Urbanismo Depois da Crise. Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 2011 [2010].
- CABRAL, Manuel Villaverde (Coord.); BORGES, Vera - Relatório Profissão: Arquitecto/a. Estudo promovido pela Ordem dos Arquitectos, Lisboa: Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, 2006.
- CARVALHO, J. – Conclusões in Departamento de Ambiente e Ordenamento – Universidade de Aveiro. Seminário: Ocupação Dispersa: Custos e Benefícios. Aveiro, 21/06/2011 (não publicado), 2011.
- COSTA, António Firmino da - Cultura Profissional dos Sociólogos. In Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas – nº 5, Lisboa: CIES-ISCTE, 1988, pp. 107-124.
- DURÃO, Susana - Patrulha e Proximidade – Uma etnografia da Polícia em Lisboa, Coimbra: Almedina, 2008.
- EUROPEAN COMMISSION, ESDP - European Spatial Development Perspective Towards Balanced and Sustainable Development of the Territory of the European Union. 1999. Disponível em: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/pdf/sum_en.pdf > Luxemburgo: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. [Acedido em: 28-01-2012]
- FISHER, C. S. - The Urban Experience. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.
- GODEFROY, F. - Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IXème au XVème siècle. 1880 - 1895. Disponível em: <http://www.micmap.org/dicfro/> [Acedido em 30-01-2012].
- Google books Ngram Viewer. 2012. Disponível em: http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=suburb%2Csuburban%2Coutskirts%2Chamlet&year_start=1780&year_end=2012&corpus=0&smoothing=3 [Acedido em 31-01-2012]
- HALL, P. G.; WARD, C. - Sociable cities: the legacy of Ebenezer Howard. Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons, 2002 [1998].
- INDOVINA, F. - Dispersão da Urbanização no Território. Cidades, Comunidades e Territórios, 20/21, 2010, p.15-25.
- Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2011. Censos 2011 – Resultados Provisórios. Disponível em: http://www.ine.pt/scripts/flex_provisorios/Main.html > [Acedido em: 31-01-2012].
- Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2011a. Censos 2011. Resultados Provisórios. Disponível em: http://www.ine.pt/ngt_server/attachfileu.jsp?look_parentBoui=131010986&att_display=n&att_download=y > [Acedido em: 31-01-2012].
- Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2011b. Quadro D.1.1 - Produto interno bruto por NUTS III (preços correntes; anual). [ficheiro *.xls] Disponível em: http://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=cn_quadros&boui=95392006 > [Acedido em: 31-01-2012].



Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2011c. Quadro D.1.18 - Emprego - indivíduos totais por NUTS III (Nº; anual). [ficheiro *.xls] Disponível em: http://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=cn_quadros&boui=95392006 [Acedido em: 31-01-2012].

Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2012. Folha Informativa da RIIBES, 37. [online] Lisboa: Instituto Nacional de Estatística.

[1] Perhaps not coincidentally, like the Portuguese expression “*saloio*” that, after all, referred to the people from the surrounding area of Lisbon (from its suburbs?).

[2] It is curious to note that, for Witcher (2005, p.120), none of this is new. This is because, assuming that the forms of suburbanization defended by Cerdá were not always mutually exclusive, as in ancient Rome the *suburbs* were characterized by the presence of extractive industries, manufacturing, warehousing, and ostentatious residences of the privileged elite that sought in the *suburbium* the *salubritas* (health), the *otium* (leisure) and the *amoenitas* (amenities). (Champlin, 1982 cit. Witcher, 2005, p.122)

[3] According to these data, more “*than 40% of the architects registered in the Association [worked] in the AML [Lisbon Metropolitan Area] and over 25% in the capital itself, which [corresponded] obviously a much higher concentration of the general population, but that [could] corresponded to the volume of construction that [went] by the architecture studios throughout the country. (...) In the AMP [the Oporto Metropolitan Area] [worked] exactly half the area of Lisbon, which is 20%, and slightly more than 10% in Oporto*” (Villaverde Cabral e Borges, 2006: 29).

[4] The birth place and residence are elements not explored in the study referenced. We would venture to suggest the importance of further analysis of such issues in the enrichment of the reflexion produces on the *ethos* of the profession. To this end we based ourselves on the fruitful results observed in relation to the exploitation of these variables in place of a set of related investigations, for example, the problematic field of sociology and anthropology of professions. For a recent case, you can check, for example, the work of Susana Durão (2008 [2006]), which, advocating an ethnographic approach to the activities of the Police in Lisbon, addresses the relationship between their residential routes and images that these professionals carry on the big city.

[5] Still on the power of “devastation of vague words” Bourdin states: “Here are two examples of devastation of vague words. First, urban growth in scope (urban sprawl, deurbanization, etc., words vary according to language, but remain vague). Urbanization occupies more and more land area, but how far can this undeniable assertion be made? The universe of small towns and villages inscribed in the same urban region found in Belgium has nothing to do with the uniform peripheries of housing in Texas. Land consumption does not have the same meaning depending on whether it takes place in a context of strong or weak demographic growth. The dispersion of housing does not have the same consequences in terms of travel and social life, according to the location of equipment and activities, or even according to the type of urban form and settlement. The weak “perceived” housing density may correspond to a rather strong objective concentration. Density itself, an apparently scientific and objective concept, can be measured in different ways. Why privilege the relationship between soil surface and the number of inhabitants? We could adopt other criteria: the number of jobs, the added value produced, the surface of the road network, the intensity of relations between inhabitants and many other indicators. We would then discover that, in all domains, including what concerns travel, extensive urban growth, measured according to the most usual criteria (distance to the centre, density...), covers very different situations. It would therefore be necessary to construct a true issue of density and dispersion, differentiating what concerns the analysis of behavior (namely mobility), the functional and economic efficiency of an urban complex, questions of equipment (namely road and sanitation networks), land use and the environment, or even construction methods or their impact on energy consumption. In this way, the extent of our ignorance would be known, which would allow us to pose new questions. There is nothing impossible in all of this, but that is not done because the issue of urban growth in extension becomes a matter of convictions.” (BOURDIN, 2011: 23-24)