

SUPERBIA

POST-PANDEMIC CHANGE IN THE SUBURBS

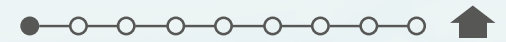


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SUPERBIA REVISITED

In 2020 our homes, our places of work, and the areas of the city we interacted with every day, changed. Living, working, eating, playing and the way we moved around had to quickly adapt to the pressures of social distancing and the confinement that came with 'lockdown'. This played out in the suburban context as much as in city centres.

For many of us, our local neighbourhoods became more important and a real focus of this adaptation. For those of us living in the suburbs, many of the challenges specific to that environment, such as lack of walkability and shared open spaces, reliance on private vehicles, and a lack of local services were felt acutely. Residents and businesses alike became highly aware of how places could be accessed and occupied in the context of a pandemic. In an effort to respond to the shocks and stresses these changes caused, councils, businesses, residents, and organisations, often made unprecedented changes to streets, policies, and patterns of movement to make these places work better for us all quickly.

In our paper 'Towards Superbia' (June 2020), looking primarily at the Australian suburbs, we explored what retrofitting and adaptation was needed to meet these new needs, and speculated on how this might change these places for the better in the long-term. We imagined how different actions might make this change happen and looked specifically at four places and four specific suburban challenges:

- How could the Suburban Main Street evolve?
- How could the Dormitory Suburb become more walkable?
- How might large out of town retail places evolve?
- How can development around suburban transport stations contribute to healthier and more inclusive communities?

Although these questions were aimed primarily at the suburbs of Australasia, many of the conversations and the issues raised have international relevance. Indeed, as many countries are facing economic challenges the need to rethink access to local services and amenities, affordable space and transport, and the repurposing of spaces no longer supporting retail, is exacerbated.

TOWARDS SUPERBIA: RECOMMENDATION REVIEW

During the pandemic we witnessed a raft of interventions that transformed spaces, often accelerating change that was already underway. Our recommendations in 'Towards Superbia' reinforced these changes.

Our work made the following recommendations:

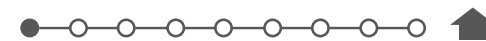
1. Diversify our suburban main streets to meet new needs.
2. Build and retrofit sustainable and healthy homes.
3. Prioritise walking and cycling improvements.
4. Invest in community health, sport, and culture.
5. Innovate the funding and delivery mechanisms.

We saw the emergence of local networks and community organisations adapting their neighbourhoods. From temporary cycle lanes in reduced capacity roads, to reimagined department stores, socially distanced markets, and libraries in phone boxes - we have seen many of these interventions come to life.

Two years on from the first lockdown, it is a timely moment to see how these actions and themes played out and whether we are any further along in evolving suburban places and addressing their inherent challenges? In this small report we uncover what trends, trials and opportunities have surfaced that can inform how and where we might continue to improve our suburbs.



Towards Superbia, a Renewed Focus on Our Suburbs - Arup 2020.



SO WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE?

Many of the observations and recommendations we made in 2020 have played out in our neighbourhoods and suburbs in a context where pressing global issues, beyond the pandemic, now take centre stage.

We have seen meanwhile uses implemented to support walking and cycling, policies focussed on delivering more mixed-use high streets that meet the principles of a 15-minute neighbourhood and some fantastic examples of locally led and locally funded projects that make significant impact to people's lives. This study not only asks how many of these are here to stay but also prompts us to reflect on how the world must respond to multiple pressures.

Not only are we living in a world wary of a return of a pandemic, but several other factors play into how and where we are living our lives, and making choices, today. These broadly can be listed as:

The climate crisis

COP 27 and COP 15 both highlighted the urgent need to set ambitious targets for carbon reduction and biodiversity increase. Indeed, we have seen unprecedented heat in London, floods in Auckland and other weather extreme all pointing to the importance of resilience in our agglomerations - urban or suburban.

Put simplistically, as we reduce the dominance of the private vehicle the opportunity to rewild and introduce biodiversity emerges as heat islands of hardstanding may be transformed into green infrastructure.

This reallocation of space will not happen easily nor seamlessly, but that evolution as a goal is a good starting point as our resources and climate are under threat. Are the suburbs the opportune environment in which to mitigate the climate crisis?

The political context

We are living in politically unstable times. The pandemic both brought us together and split us apart, depending on whether one is thinking at the local or global scale. We have seen unrest across racial, financial and occupational divides. The suburbs often represent some of the more cohesive environments as they may cater to a far narrower and specific bands of a population than the urban centre. However, it is not only physical geography that is at play as we witness daily the power of social media to both foster and communicate with highly self-interested communities. The power of virtual communities

should not be under-estimated as they bridge disparate physical spaces. However, particularly relevant to the suburban context, do they replace it?

The cost of living

Inequity is exacerbated as the cost-of-living rises. While this is a global issue catalysed, to an extent, by the pandemic and the war in the Ukraine, in the United Kingdom it is also the result of Brexit. As the cost of goods, services and heating one's home rise people are both less mobile and yet also may look to find alternative more affordable ways of living. Can the suburbs offer that choice?



CASE STUDIES

1. High Street Diversification

Over almost the past decade urban high streets have been exploring ways to be less reliant on retail as the activator of the street. Workspaces, community uses and recreational activities inhabit spaces previously devoted to retail. With the suburbs becoming places of 24/7 activity rather than dormitories for the city, these diverse uses are starting to occupy ground floors.

While people want to avoid the daily commute, they do not necessarily want to work in their homes. Suburban high streets are embracing diversification in recognition of this and the fact that all generations are looking for places and spaces to play, learn and meet throughout the day, everyday.

Example: East Street Exchange

East Street Exchange, in Greater London, is a new extension to an existing local library. It forms part of the What Walworth Wants project to make flexible and affordable meeting spaces for communities and to create a more open and accessible relationship with the high street.



- 1 Startup Mall, Kings Mall, Hammersmith, Greater London
- 2 East Street Exchange, Walworth, Greater London
- 3 Cottrell House, Wembley, Greater London
- 4 International House Workspace, Brixton, Greater London

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CASE STUDIES

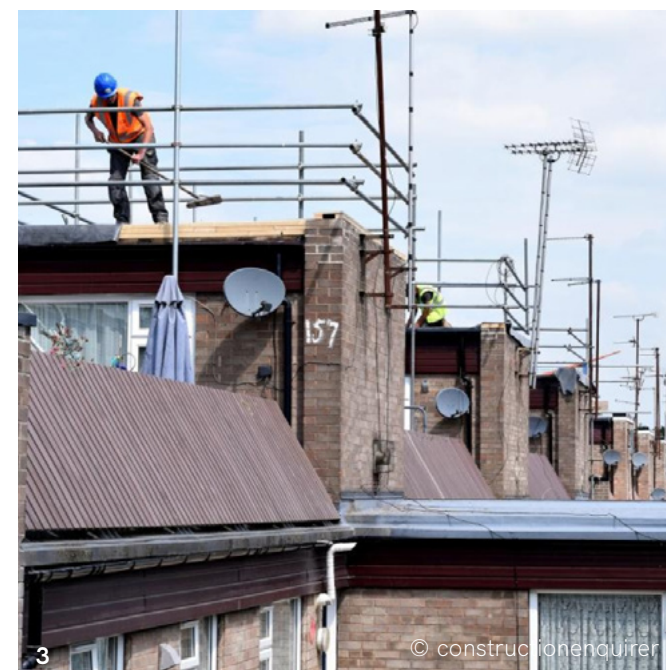
2. Retrofitting homes

Most suburban houses built prior to the last decade are woefully energy inefficient. They certainly are not meeting current net zero targets - neither in terms of embodied carbon nor their operation. The retrofitting of suburban homes increases their affordability helping retain existing residents and increasing the appeal for potential new residents.

When homes are being retrofit the opportunity to think more broadly about the configuration and use of the space presents itself. People might seize the retrofit as a moment to provide better workspace, allow for more privacy or access to outdoor space.

Example: Kingstanding, Birmingham

Birmingham City Council (BCC) has announced its initial contribution to retrofit 300 homes as part of the three cities retrofit programme. In total Birmingham has 125,690 inter-war homes. These homes, that are able to be improved to EPC band C and above, the residents would save on average £376 annually per household. EPC is a UK government stipulated measure used by local energy assessors to judge a property's energy efficiency. The third best group with high energy saving potential is class C.



- 1 The Greater London Authority's Cool Roofs Scheme (c) London Borough of Redbridge.
- 2 Waltham Forest Council worked with Aston Group to manage the retrofit of a council owned property, into its first-ever eco show home. (<https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/housing/energy-efficiency/retrofit-advice/waltham-forest-eco-show-home>)
- 3 Birmingham city council's housing stock is a large net contributor to the city's carbon emissions, accounting for 26% of the city's total

CASE STUDIES

3. Walking and cycling

During the pandemic many cities witnessed a vast increase in bicycle sales. Indeed, finding a bicycle to buy often became challenging. This fantastic take up of cycling demonstrated that when the streets are quieter people feel more confident to venture out on a bike. This catalysed an increase in the amount cycle infrastructure in both the city and the suburbs. While in many cases these are merely paint on the roadway, some have been redesigned to create dedicated lanes that are clearly segregated by level changes and/or bollards.

Walking also saw an increase as people escaped their homes for a break and some fresh air, and walked to their local shops for provisions. Parks became highly subscribed and the need for investment in their maintenance underscored. In the suburban context, the pandemic highlighted that there is not always the option to walk to shops given the dominating and hostile road infrastructure. Efforts to change this and create neighbourhoods that offer a mixed of uses within walking distance - whether referred to as the 15-minute neighbourhood, new urbanist or compact communities - have been gaining traction over the last couple of decades. The pandemic simply heightened awareness of the need for a departure from the car-based suburb that is a dormitory or satellite of the city.

Example: Ontario, Canada

<https://www.cycleto.ca/Move365>

In late 2020, Cycle Toronto introduced Move365 to extend its work into the suburbs of Toronto. The programme acknowledges that building a culture of cycling requires many supports beyond infrastructure, whether it's helping people access bicycles, providing education on how to ride safely, or tackling secure bike parking and access to the bike share facilities.



- 1 Tontine Crescent, Boston
- 2 Cycle Toronto, Bike Safety Station
- 3 Cycle Toronto info stand

CASE STUDIES

4. Community Health, Well-being and Culture

As people sought places of reprieve from the confines of their homes, the public realm, and outdoor space in general, was asked to perform more intensively. The fact that cars were off the streets helped enable their appropriation for outdoor activities. In some neighbourhoods it has demonstrated that traffic, even post-pandemic, is low enough that streets can continue to support play and other neighbourhood activities.

In the US there have been instances of 'road diets' that occurred either before or during the pandemic. During the pandemic they came into their own. In many cases they remain even post-pandemic as vehicles have learned to adjust to the narrowed roadways.

Example: Crouch End Play Street

Before the pandemic the residents, comprising numerous children, along a small street in Crouch End had mooted the idea of closing off their street to traffic. However, until 2020 the concept gained little traction with the Council. Throughout the pandemic the street only allowed vehicular access to residents as play, shared meals and gatherings took priority. Today the street remains low traffic, local network behaviour adapted to pandemic conditions. Monthly gatherings continue to take place on the street.



- 1 Phillips Square, Boston
- 2 Tontine Crescent, Boston
- 3 Crouch End, London
- 4 Crouch End, London

CASE STUDIES

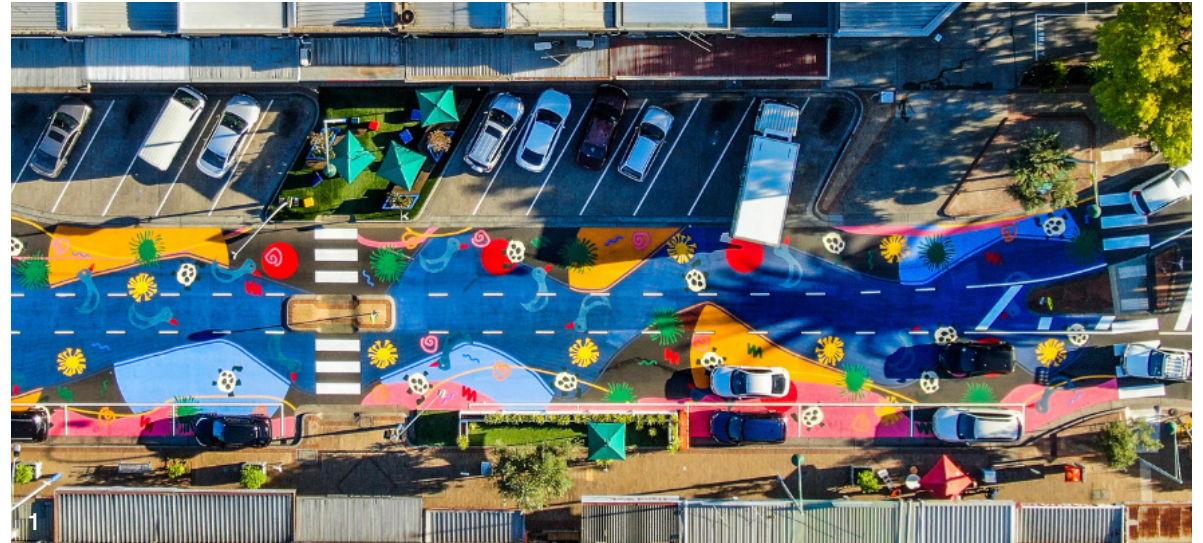
5. Funding and financing projects in Superbia

The pandemic demonstrated that planning authorities can be light on their feet permitting, for example, parking spaces to be occupied by outdoor dining. Most of the pop-up activities were funded by entrepreneurial citizens, and we all enjoyed the benefits of a transformed public realm. In order to continue this positive transformation of the suburbs a few funding mechanisms have emerged. These funds serve not only to kick-start projects but, most importantly change the perception of suburban districts as, for example, car-dominated spaces to host markets, sports and other activities that support healthier lifestyles.

Example: Melbourne Suburban Grants Programme

<https://www.suburbandevlopment.vic.gov.au/living-local>

The Suburban Grants are intended to support projects in suburban shopping strips and activity centres that will support and respond to the opportunities and challenges in Melbourne's suburbs as more Melburnians work and spend their leisure time locally. The total fund is in the amount of \$15 million Australian dollars.



- 1 Glengala Road, Sunshine West, Melbourne, Australia
- 2 Temporary pedestrianisation of High Street, St Albans, UK
- 3 Temporary parklet to support businesses, St Albans, UK

EQUITABLE SUBURBS

Over the course of history suburbs have been founded alternatively on the concept of providing access across demographic groups to the essentials of a healthy and productive life, as well as those focused on only providing access to an exclusive few. Today a key driver for people locating in a suburban location is affordability.

Greater open space, generous private outdoor space and a larger home are all attractors. However, it is evident that today's suburbanites are often people who embraced urban living but can no longer afford it, especially as they have families.

This population thrives on the proximity to commercial activity, arts and culture, and the transport mode options they benefited from in city centre living. Many of these people work in city centre locations. The pandemic demonstrated that people need not physically go into work every day and catalysed the move to the suburbs where greater amenity for all household members is affordable. It also furthered the diversity in the demographic profile of some suburbs, especially those from the mid- and late- 20thc. True equity in the suburbs is a work in progress as access to community infrastructure, schools and jobs remains uneven.



EQUITABLE SUBURBS

Our clients tell us...

Affordability catalyses relocation as much as the pandemic did:

- While the pandemic may have 'been the last straw' catalysing an exodus from the city to small towns, the suburbs or village, affordability was already a driving factor
- In some places - North America and Germany, for example - the pandemic saw a leapfrogging effect when people left the city; as the city and older more central suburbs are less affordable young families moved further out to newer suburbs. The longer-term effect of this may be that these newer suburbs will be intensified as their new constituents have become accustomed to the amenities of urban centres and will try to recreate this mix and proximity

Frankfurt Nord West is not necessarily for people who want to move to suburbs or village, or those who prefer working four days from home, but for those who would actually like to live in the north end or inner-city districts but can't afford it.

Birte Biemann, Municipal Department for Urban Planning, City of Frankfurt

The 1960s homes of these suburbs are found to be quite malleable to renovate, expand and bring up to current sustainability standards

- Affordability is also a consideration for businesses; as proximity has proved to be less critical thanks to remote working, companies have either relocated to the suburbs or created suburban outposts
- The suburbs have seen a proliferation of affordable shared workspace as people's homes are often too small or busy to accommodate a suitable home office. With this comes the facilities and amenities that serve workers
- Some companies have gone so far as to provide housing adjacent to the workplace for employees - revisiting the concept of the company town/suburb. This may provide affordable housing for employees but given the tendency for employment with a particular company to no longer be a lifelong arrangement there is still long-term insecurity
- Some companies provide amenities and facilities for employees and local residents.

While this helps address cost of living issues it also can lead to a lack of clarity as to whether this community infrastructure is truly public

- Intensification around suburban shopping centres provides the ideal opportunity to provide housing for smaller households - i.e. single people, seniors

If you get the messaging right around what are very, very challenging economic times in terms of the impact on climate, health and wellbeing, an opportunity to do things differently that has much more positive outcomes.

Rupert Thacker, Head of highways profession, HCC

- Community mutual aid groups formed quickly and informally within streets and neighbourhoods. Volunteers continue to make the rounds delivering food and other necessities to their more vulnerable neighbours. [\(https://madeinhackney.org/\)](https://madeinhackney.org/)

EQUITABLE SUBURBS

Our clients tell us...

Not all suburbs are created equal:

- The leapfrogging effect described above may allow people to find a home that is affordable, but these places are often not served by the community infrastructure or the quantity or quality of the inner more affluent suburbs
- Not only are people priced out of some suburban locations in terms of the housing market there may also be a NIMBY resistance to new populations taking up residence, attending the local schools and community centres

Although in the immediate months following the pandemic Northolt experienced a negative impact on footfall, more recent data (summer 2023) is showing that spend and footfall has now returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Sophie Beagles, London Borough of Ealing, UK

- Some suburbs saw front yards repurposed as residents set up makeshift businesses on them, offering services from cycle repair, to the sale of plants and used clothing. This contributed to pedestrian activity on otherwise car-based streets and affordability

- An evolution and attrition may naturally occur as the affluent suburbanites are not resisting newcomers. The hope is that eventually these suburbs will be re-populated, and people will be able to take advantage of the robust housing stock, fantastic gardens and proximity to nature and other amenities

We have got some good opportunities around marketing and around infrastructure to try to improve the bus network..that ties in with our ambition around the HERT (Hertfordshire to Essex Rapid Transit), which is an east-west transit system that we're looking to promote in stages.

Rupert Thacker, Head of Highways Profession, Hertfordshire County Council, UK

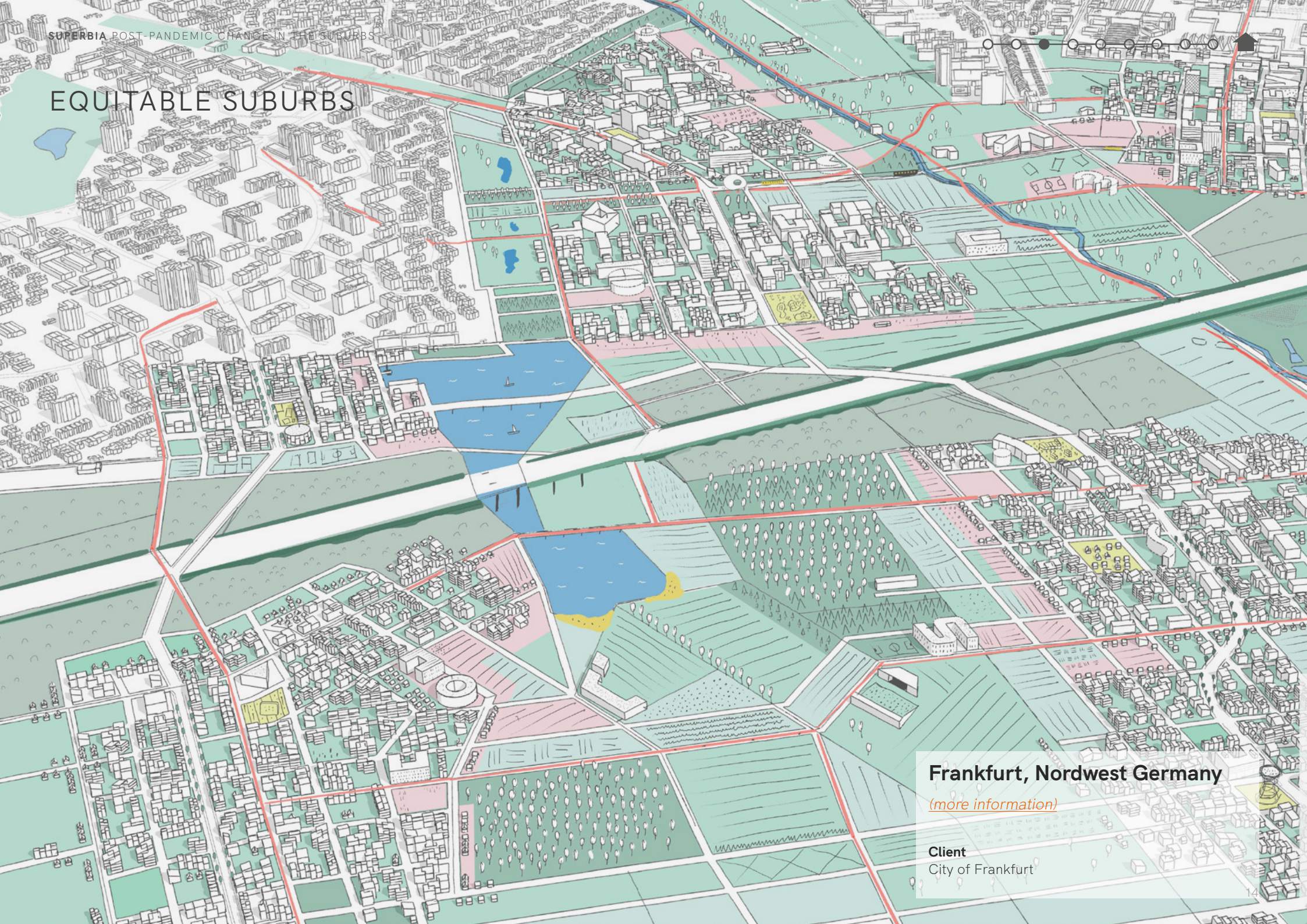
- In those suburbs that are affordable a new energy is taking hold as initiatives 'from the ground up' are bringing in a mix of uses to allow for 15-minute neighbourhoods, and places are privileging pedestrians and cyclists. A key concern is whether these walkable suburbs will remain affordable

- Optimistically what we see is a recognition that suburban living, as often originally conceived, provides access to expanses of nature, quiet and a sense of community and that all of this might be enriched by what gets called 'gentle intensification'.... The challenge is whether diverse housing types are accessible to diverse demographics

The massive issue here in the Commonwealth [of Massachusetts, USA] is that you have developers who are willing to lose out on millions and millions of dollars because they know housing is so essential. And yet the community still won't allow it. It's a very unusual circumstance.

Monica Tibbits-Nutt, Executive Director, Route 128 Business Council, Massachusetts, USA

EQUITABLE SUBURBS



Frankfurt, Northwest Germany

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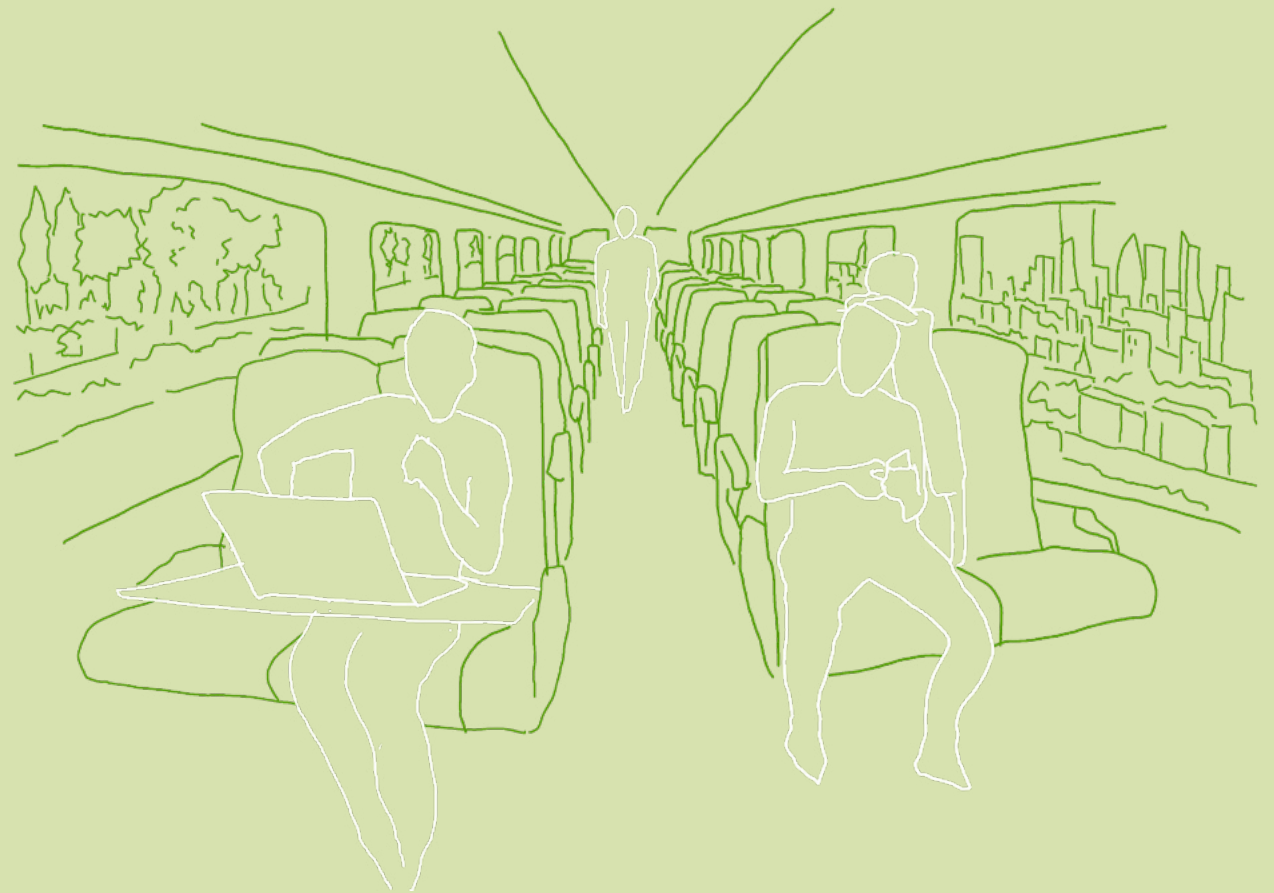
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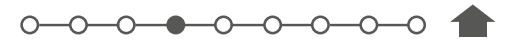
ESCAPING THE CITY

The desire to have easy access to both public outdoor space - nature and parklands - and private outdoor space heightened during the pandemic. There was a surge in the appreciation of the role of the public realm and its power to foster health and well-being.

Villages and many suburbs can fulfil the want to access open space just as Ebenezer Howard's Garden Suburb did beginning in the early 20th century. The first ring of suburbs, the garden suburbs and railway suburbs, became desirable places to live. They are now mature and well-established; their residents having benefited from being increasingly close to the city as the city often expanded outward and more roadways were built.

As noted above, the suburbs were and are not always equitable environments. Many of these suburbs have become somewhat exclusive and expensive. Meanwhile, suburban growth continued and the newer suburbs, those of the 1950s/60s/70s, are more affordable. While many of these offer some of the 'garden suburb' features they tend to be more car-based. There is now evidence, accelerated by the pandemic, of the inhabitants finding ways to not only increase the building on their plots, but also intensify and diversify their neighbourhoods. As cities and developers witness this, some new settlements - though, sadly, not all - are being founded on the principles of much more mixed use and walkable suburbs.





ESCAPING THE CITY

Our clients tell us...

- An accelerated desire for fresh air, nature and a work-life balance is driving families to move out towards the suburbs
- The importance of good transport links seems key to people's goals of 'escaping the city' so that they are well-linked to urban areas, but also active travel links within the suburban area

Rather than changing or investing in existing suburbs to make them more pedestrian or cycle friendly, people are going to little villages where this infrastructure already exists.

Birte Biemann, Municipal Department for Urban Planning, City of Frankfurt, Germany

- Families and young professionals tend to 'leap-frog' newer suburbs in favour of more established areas further out from the city. A higher abundance of space as well as the ability to renovate and expand there is a key pull factor
- Planning and policy roadblocks mean schemes to encourage the movement of people to the suburbs are being curtailed
- Developers want to change the fabric of the suburbs by introducing mixed-use and intensifying residential areas. Councils and authorities are against this move in an effort to preserve historic character

There's an established corridor route through which Berliners make their way to the Baltic Sea.. Now there's a desire to see it as a more permanent base rather than somewhere to just go for holiday/ weekends. Authorities were shocked by wave of population who wants to move there.

Dr. Ulrich Vetter, Förder- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft Vorpommern-Greifswald mbH, Germany

- However, there are some positive examples such as in Ealing, a London suburb, where local authorities are boosting neighbourhood centres, encouraging employment led growth, and introducing site allocations for mixed-use
- Companies (especially with a research focus) which don't have a need to stay within the city have also started being drawn to the suburbs, where land is cheaper and many employees reside

I agree with my colleague that we can't yet see how the long-term planning processes and goals will change due to covid. But my feeling is that actually it's not covid that caused the changes, the goals and processes; covid accelerated things that were already changing, such as, for example, a bigger emphasis on certain types of transportation like cycling and so on.

Birte Biemann, Municipal Department for Urban Planning, City of Frankfurt

ESCAPING THE CITY



The Phoenix, Lewes, UK

[*\(more information\)*](#)

Client
Human Nature Places

THE RETURN OF THE HIGH STREET

In city centres the pandemic saw the accelerated death of the high street. The way in which we shop was already transforming as transactions are facilitated online. Meanwhile, in many smaller towns, villages, and neighbourhoods the high street saw an increase in activity and, in turn, vibrancy.

People, eager to have some sort of human connection during lockdown, enjoyed being able to walk or cycle to get groceries or go to the pharmacy. They enjoyed restaurants spilling out into the public realm. The local became critical.

Footfall and spend seems to be higher than pre-pandemic and with people working from home a few days a week this may continue. However, the death or revitalisation of an area's high street depends very much on its pre-pandemic state: wealthy suburban high streets saw higher footfall, while the pandemic was not enough on its own to resuscitate failing high streets in poorer areas. The challenge is tackling the latter situation. Suburban intensification and diversification – of both the population and housing types – may go some way to addressing this.





THE RETURN OF THE HIGH STREET

Our clients tell us...

- That there was higher footfall during the pandemic than pre-pandemic in wealthy suburban high streets
- That the importance of a 'natural core' which provides local services in an area was highlighted during the pandemic
- That high streets and small rows of shops in more deprived areas felt a more severe and longer lasting impact from the pandemic than wealthier high streets

Northolt has been negatively impacted by the pandemic. A high proportion of residents were put on furlough and pre-existing deprivation has been further exposed. Residents are eager to see investment and diversification in Northolt's High Streets to create a more thriving and resilient suburb. We are working with local people to deliver this through a community-led 20-minute neighbourhood framework.

Sophie Beagles, London Borough of Ealing, UK

- As people living in the suburbs work from home they want the same amenities - the street experience - they find in the urban centre

- Diversifying suburban high streets is essential for resilience and encouraging more regular and longer dwell time e.g. co-working spaces
- Providing safe and attractive walking and cycling routes to suburban high streets is essential to ensure their long term footfall

It's clear to me that you need to create places that have got low levels of traffic, so that people feel safe to be able to move about differently. Otherwise, once you're in the car you'll go to Tesco's. If you're walking, cycling, you'll use your local shops, you'll use your local high streets.

Rupert Thacker, Head of highways profession, HCC

In Northolt, local people tell us they want more amenities and services on their doorstep, particularly in terms of a High Street offer. This would also support local job creation which will be critical to ensuring the area recovers and renews from the pandemic.

Sophie Beagles, London Borough of Ealing, UK

I think there needs to be a renaissance in those (high street) environments to make them places people want to be .. they should be places that people want to use. I think some e.g. co-op have done a cracking job of upgrading their shops and making them feel kind of invested in and valuable. I don't think that's matched by the investment around them. The spaces around them haven't changed yet, and I think that's what needs to happen.

Rupert Thacker, Head of highways profession, HCC

Whatever we build today should be adaptable - we can learn from the past: tall ground floors, centres that are an agglomeration of buildings, not a single building. What is good for normal times is always good.

Antonias Schultze Monking, City of Frankfurt

THE RETURN OF THE HIGH STREET



**Waltham Cross Town Centre
Hertfordshire, UK**

[*\(more information\)*](#)

Client
Broxbourne Borough Council

WORKING IN THE SUBURBS

A jobs-led approach to strategic suburban sites was already afoot pre-pandemic but the pandemic emphasised the need for economic and social resilience. Two strands of more deliberate flexibility have emerged. Firstly, homes need to be able to accommodate workspace. This obviously only applies to desk-based work, generally white collar. The second strand speaks more broadly to the location of employment.

There is both a focus on retaining existing and allocating new work-based sites – i.e. Strategic Industrial Sites in outer London suburbs, the increased interest by biotech and knowledge-based industries in the suburbs – and the provision of co-working space in suburban centres, acknowledging that homes cannot currently provide this space.

A slow but growing understanding of the transport infrastructure required to give suburban residents the working conditions they require is surfacing. There is evidence of both an 'inside out' and 'outside in' approach to this need. Suburban office campuses, or 'parks', intensify spatially and in terms of use diversity. Many of these places already seek to provide amenities on-site, from gyms to restaurants to nurseries. Alternatively, or simultaneously, predominantly residential areas intensify with workspace and commercial enterprises. Either way sees the intensification of suburbs and residents potentially being in closer proximity to employment opportunities. Adaptability and flexibility, and good internet access, emerge as qualities cutting across the scale of the home to that of the district.



WORKING IN THE SUBURBS

Our clients tell us...

- People do not want to commute everyday
- People want a sense of community that includes co-working space

We need new forms of living together and doing business with each other. Co-working spaces, even in the outer areas, are constantly filled.

Dr. Ulrich Vetter, Förder- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft Vorpommern-Greifswald mbH, Germany

- New or intensified neighbourhoods should include integrated workspace
- Commercial enterprises that would previously have sought out city centre space are looking to the suburbs for new locations
- Industrial/business parks must be competitive – they should be intensified and offer tenants facilities and amenities; business park operators and owners see the advantage of integration with the host suburb or town
- People are looking for homes that easily accommodate workspace that is spatially separated from the rest of the living space

- New districts are emerging at the periphery of cities that support knowledge-based industry and can draw on international pool of recent graduates; these people want to live close to work

Developers are eager to create places where homes are closer to industry and businesses, even if it means less housing profitability. However, segregation persists as existing residents – and zoning – block this use mix, and the inevitable demographic mix.

Monica Tibbits-Nutt, CEO, Route 128 Business Council

I think developers have recognised that there's merit in co-working spaces. There was meant to be one in Welwyn Garden City, but they pulled out. There was also meant to be one in Stone Hills for the bottom of Debenhams, but it disappeared. But if you build them into local centres with coffee shops and facilities e.g. childcare, and all of the other stuff around them, I think they should be great.

Rupert Thacker, Head of highways profession, HCC

LESSONS FROM 'NEW TOWNS'

Whether the decision to live in the suburbs is an escape from the grit and density of the city or an endeavour to find a more affordable lifestyle, most agree that it has the potential to offer the benefits of the 19th and 20th century garden suburbs.

Of course, there are many types of suburbs but, if nothing else, the pandemic highlighted that the tenets of the garden suburb are those that people value highly in daily life. These include a strong sense of community and continuity.

People want to be able to depend upon one another, to look out for each other and each other's children and elderly. Local services should be stable, central and easy to access. Open space, fresh air, nature and recreational activities should also be in proximity. Many of the early suburban models were far more mixed in terms of uses than those that came mid-20thc. They included commercial activity that provided jobs. Indeed, some of the most notable suburbs were company towns. Many were sited around train stations; they were what we might call today 'Transit Oriented Developments' (TOD). It was not necessary to own a car. While in many places the pandemic catalysed an increase in private car usage as people feared getting into a train carriage with other people, ultimately there is a desire to both minimise and improve the quality of commuting.



LESSONS FROM 'NEW TOWNS'

Our clients tell us...

- The suburbs can provide a sense of community as the lines between recreation and retail blur
- Providing a mix of uses through intensification will enable a walkable and accessible environment – it is all about concentrating on experience
- Intensification will take years and years but one can plan for, and around, public green spaces and a robust public realm
- Community amenities and facilities serve as neighbourhood hubs
- Public open space is offered across diverse scales, from the pocket park to the woodland
- Single family houses, multi-family villas and mansion blocks are interspersed in a neighbourhood block
- A town common or green serves as a civic focal point

Shopping centres provide a specific opportunity. We need to bring amenities to where the people are, and that is in the suburbs.

Development Director (anonymous), Development Company, North America

It's a question of fresh air, possibilities for sports/water sports/cycling and so forth. Beautiful countryside for walks, all much harder to get if in the centre of Berlin... But there is a need for this social sphere - co-working possibilities and things like that need to be developed simultaneously within a suburb. New residential must fulfil the demands of modern people.

Dr. Ulrich Vetter, Förder- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft Vorpommern-Greifswald mbH, Germany

Planning suburbs is like a recipe: you must start incrementally, have various densities, plan for all of those green spaces. Add street experience, consider flow of people and commercial experience to create the animation that you need.

Development Director (anonymous), Development Company, North America

The pandemic has sped up the process as the authorities were shocked by the wave of the population looking to leave the city. On a good salary in Berlin you still cannot get a flat. In the outer areas you can more easily support a family... and give them access to fresh air.

Dr. Ulrich Vetter, Förder- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft Vorpommern-Greifswald mbH, Germany

EMBEDDING BEST PRACTICE

Our clients tell us...

- Trialling solutions and early meaningful engagement are essential to enable transformational and long-lasting change towards best practice thinking
- To enable intensification, NIMBYism and local politics will be the biggest challenges
- Planning policy and design codes must be adaptable to neighbourhood level needs and issues
- Investment in public infrastructure is essential to allow sensitive intensification. New infill and urban expansion developments provide a key opportunity to fund this infrastructure within adjoining suburbs, which must be fully integrated to encourage wider change e.g., active travel
- Politicians are aware of the need to change the suburban retail model, but they are not always prepared to reconcile this in a way that will make meaningful change

Our new place and movement design guide is a step change in our expectations around developers and how they bring places forward, I do think the pandemic certainly helped shape some of our views around that and hopefully we'll carry some of the momentum through to get that adopted and members will accept some of these changes.

Rupert Thacker, Head of highways profession, HCC

Does the new State Governor need to step in and have more of a direct role in the land use decisions and really start to push these communities who are resisting change? Who made the promises around the percentage of affordable housing and who can actually hold them to it? I think that's really going to be the big question.

Monica Tibbits-Nutt, CEO, Route 128 Business Council

We have done things in the last 2 1/2 years that would have taken us 5 or 10 years to achieve. The fact that we were able to do it, the fact that it happened because of Covid and the fact that we were able to implement it and then we've had to retrofit a process around it has meant that we've delivered.

Rupert Thacker, Head of highways profession, HCC

We are we are trying to meet some very high standards. For example with the model split in relation to public transportation. I think without COVID these ideas of having a mixed-use district on the outskirts of the city with good public transportation would not be so credible. Everyone was working from home and saw we need it. Similarly, providing decentralized sport areas in green areas so that there's something for youth, and also for everyone to do more activities - this is much more credible now having had the crisis.

Birte Biemann, Municipal Department for Urban Planning, City of Frankfurt, Germany

CONCLUSIONS: ONGOING ADAPTATION

The recommendations made in June 2020 are still highly applicable 3 years on. The behavioural and spatial changes witnessed during and after the pandemic have influenced how the private and public sector think about the future of the suburbs.

In many cases actions taken in the pandemic have become permanent - whether in relation to active travel, outdoor dining or the introduction of alternative main/high street amenities. At the very least the themes highlighted in this study are acknowledged as requiring action and attention.

However, one issue that was not directly highlighted previously is the need for suburbs to be equitable places: they must offer affordable housing, and easy and affordable access to jobs, education and community infrastructure. In summary:

Diversify our suburban main streets to meet new needs:

Multi-generation living, co-working space, education, independent shops and shopping centre intensification.

Build and retrofit sustainable and healthy homes:

Private outdoor space, live/work accommodation, choice of types, environmental performance.

Prioritise walking and cycling improvements:

Dedicated cycle lanes, cycle hire, secure cycle parking, lighting, shaded pedestrian routes.

Invest in community health, sport, and culture:

All generation leisure facilities, civic/community centre, diverse usable outdoor spaces, performances spaces.

Innovate the funding and delivery mechanisms:

Sponsorship, partnerships, Business Improvement Districts, intensification.

Provide affordable housing beyond standard social provision:

Cooperative-living, shared living, custom/self-build, innovative tenures.

CONCLUSIONS: ONGOING ADAPTATIONS

I think the pandemic has shown us that being responsive, engaging, listening, having debate is really important. Local government is quite a slow-moving beast in terms of the way things are done... but it's certainly my drive for the team to work differently off the back of the learning in the pandemic.do things with people rather than to them. Trial it, take the feedback, evolve ideas. This gives us a chance to succeed and makes our lives easier ultimately.

Rupert Thacker, Head of highways profession, HCC



SUPERBIA

POST-PANDEMIC CHANGE IN THE SUBURBS



JUNE 2023