



The Suburbanisation Of The City SALON, May 8 2006

Multiple Choice

Are we:

- 1 urbanising the suburbs
- 2 suburbanising the city
- 3 both
- 4 neither
- 5 we should be asking different questions

On the evening of 8 May, these possibilities were explored in an urban salon organised by *This Is Not A Gateway*, whose director is freelance urbanist Trenton Oldfield. As this name hints to an inclination to question established concepts and truisms, this is exactly what the speakers and audience collaboratively set out to do.

Starting point of the evening was the discomfoting thought that the values and perceptions of the suburbs increasingly shape the city. This thesis brought together four women speakers (itself probably a precedent) who each brought their own perspective to the issue.

Alessandra Buonfino from the Young Foundation analysed concepts of neighbourliness in the changing context of contemporary UK cities, provoking the question whether neighbourliness should be a policy aim in itself or that sound policies in the fields of – say – housing, education and public space would automatically generate the benefits associated with it. Artist Denna Jones challenged the sanitation of urban environments occurring when anxious professionals are lured to seemingly comfortable lofts but find they have to deal with some rougher aspects of city life. Whilst to her, the suburbanisation of the urban needs to be countered with subversive artistic practice, Kathryn Firth (LSE / Kohn Pederson Fox) is less concerned: safety and cleanliness are neither urban or suburban in her view, and the real challenge lies elsewhere. She invited those who fear a suburbanisation of the city to look at the *real* suburbs that are currently being created: for example, in Florida most traffic signs are now at wind-screen heights since the pedestrian perspective is simply irrelevant, while rural Colorado recently saw the rise of the 'urban loft-style mansion' for those people who like its aesthetic connotations but not the city itself. Lastly, Professor Deborah Stevenson of the University of Newcastle, Australia argued that it is not the places where people live that we should be concerned with, but rather the aspirations and fears of the people who inhabit them, and how their values shape or are mobilised by wider political agendas.

What followed was a remarkable discussion – especially for a group of people primarily consisting of what is so often called 'the built environment professions'. It was remarkable not only because it brought together people from the ruthlessly progressivist Manifesto Club with CABE policy advisors and communitarians. Nor was it remarkable just because they agreed on a number of issues, such as the dismal lack of power of local government to adequately guide or at least respond to mediocre private sector development. The really remarkable outcome of the evening was the fundamental shift in the discussion from physical spaces to people. Too often, professionals and policymakers presume the 'death of the subject' when discussing spatial behaviour of people, denying them any capacity for independent agency.

In discussions about abstract issues such as density or architectural styles, people are patronisingly portrayed as passive consumers whose choice for 'urban' or 'suburban' is dictated by politicians or market forces. That individual people, however selfish, misinformed or manipulable they might be, have legitimate worries, dreams to fulfil and trade-offs to make is thereby often forgotten. The resulting yellow-brick 'sustainable communities' and loudly proclaimed 'respect agendas' are therefore not only ugly and unnecessarily alarmist but most of all deeply disrespectful of our human intelligence and autonomy.

We have to take people seriously and listen more patiently to the narratives of their hopes, fears, ideas and grudges. We have to allow them to fully inform themselves and offer truly multiple choices. Only if we are really interested in the voices of those dismissively portrayed as 'local people' we will find clues to solve the current theoretical and policy deadlocks between, for example, those arguing for and against density. This does not imply a simple answer to any of the challenges that urban policy has to face, but it is a basis. The realisation that people matter, not houses nor fences per se, could be significant in policy for years to come. The organisers and participants of *This Is Not A Gateway* might well be into something bigger here.

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