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Research paper

SUBURBIA: UNIFORMITY AND DIVERSITY IN RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENTS

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Abstract

Suburbs represent an integral component of metropolitan development, reflecting diverse urban planning, social, and cultural approaches to housing. They are typically characterized by residential communities marked by uniformity, mass production, and spatial monotony. However, the development of suburban areas reveals significant functional, morphological, and geographical variations, contingent upon regional and cultural contexts. This paper examines the typological characteristics of selected case studies through a comparative analysis of geographical context, functional zoning, and the socio-economic structure of the population. The research focuses on architectural and urban homogeneity, spatial organization patterns, and housing-related aspects. The primary objective is to identify and classify recurring spatial patterns, similarities, and differences in suburban models across North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia, grouping them according to specific typological features of housing.

Key words: suburbia, urban development, cookie-cutter housing, settlement typology, tract housing, architectural homogeneity, mass housing, comparative analysis

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1. INTRODUCTION

Suburbia represents one of the most significant phenomena of urban development in the 20th century. It emerged as a multifaceted response to urban growth—initially as a consequence of industrialization, and later as a solution to the immense housing demand that followed the Second World War. The development of suburbs introduced new architectural and urban models, which gradually acquired distinctive characteristics and began to diverge in terms of location, morphology, and housing typologies. A defining feature of suburbia is low-density urban landscapes that typically surround the dense, high-rise urban centres in large cities [1]. Suburbia refers to residential areas located on the periphery of cities, characterized by lower population density compared to central urban districts. These areas often comprise single-family homes, private gardens, and localized commercial zones, offering a hybrid of urban and rural lifestyles [2].

In their spatial manifestations, suburbs serve as a middle ground between the density of cities and the isolation of rural areas, providing residents with a sense of community alongside access to urban amenities [3]. In addition to low building density, suburbs are typically characterized by rigid parceling systems, enclosed residential typologies, and uniform street morphology. Due to these characteristics, suburbs have often become synonymous with architectural and urban monotony. Nevertheless, the suburban form is shaped by various factors, including the desire for home ownership, decentralization of population, and the pursuit of community building [2].

Given the increasing necessity to redefine suburban models, this research aims to examine the extent to which architectural and urban diversity is present in contemporary residential communities. By analyzing suburban patterns across diverse geographical and cultural contexts, suburbs can be categorized into two primary groups: the first includes suburbs that exhibit similar forms of spatial organization [4], while the second consists of suburban areas with varied morphological and functional characteristics [5]. In this context, suburbs are most commonly perceived as homogeneous spaces dominated by uniform family housing; however, typological characteristics can be explored from multiple perspectives and classified according to a wide range of criteria, such as socio-economic composition, distance from city centers, and transportation connectivity.

This study proposes a classification of suburbs based on their typological features, with an emphasis on geographic location, functional organization, and socio-economic structure. The primary objective is to identify and group recurring patterns of spatial organization through a comparative analysis of suburban models across selected case studies, focusing on their typological housing characteristics.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this research is grounded in a comparative analysis and synthesis of a broad range of case studies concerning the spatial form of suburbia. The study is based on a comparative examination of dominant geographic contexts—North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia—with the inclusion of a representative example from Africa. The research draws upon urban planning documentation, case study analysis, and theoretical literature, approached through a comparative lens that considers historical context, spatial patterns, housing typologies, and the visual identity of suburban settlements. In addition to

comparative methods, the study also incorporates generalization, concretization, and specialization as methodological tools. The central research question is whether suburbs predominantly represent homogeneous architectural and urban entities, or whether, depending on the selected criteria, diverse typologies may emerge. The purpose of defining typologies is to identify specific suburban types and provide detailed insight into the built form, location, demographic characteristics, and/or historical background of suburban areas. Based on both inductive and deductive reasoning, nine case studies were selected as typological representatives of defined suburban groupings. The primary criteria for selection included geographic context, followed by functional-spatial characteristics and the socioeconomic composition of the population. Through the analysis of these selected case studies, the research explores architectural and urban principles, as well as the social and historical factors that have influenced suburban development.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF SUBURBS

The genesis of suburban areas can be traced back to ancient Rome, when the patrician class began constructing villas outside the city walls, driven by the desire to escape the crowded urban centers. However, modern suburban concepts began to emerge only in the 19th century, in the United States and Great Britain [6]. The expansion of industry and tram transport, rapid urban growth, population increase, and the deterioration of sanitary and housing conditions in urban cores led affluent populations to migrate toward city outskirts [7]. This shift was motivated by the urban bourgeoisie's aspiration to live closer to nature and away from pollution and urban problems [8], a rationale that would continue to justify the growing trend of peripheral development [9].

The earliest suburban models in modern society emerged in 19th-century Britain with the housing concept known as the "Garden City," developed by Ebenezer Howard. His vision proposed a decentralized network of small urban units combining housing, work, and recreation, surrounded by green belts [10]. The first realized model was Letchworth Garden City, constructed in 1903, followed by Welwyn, established as a London suburb in 1920. Howard's idea offered a "golden mean" between rural and urban living and had a profound influence on suburban planning worldwide. His comprehensive concept emphasized that garden cities should not expand horizontally but rather multiply like living cells, whereby surplus populations would establish a new center at a sufficient distance from the original, again surrounded by green space [11]. Furthermore, a network of six to seven such garden cities was envisioned to spatially orbit around a central garden city, together forming a polycentric "social city" of approximately 250,000 residents. This spatial multiplication was conceived as limitless—each completed social city would spark the formation of the next, much like a web-like structure [12]. A defining characteristic of Letchworth was that it slowly attracted more residents through low taxes, low rents, and generous space provisions, primarily appealing to skilled middle-class workers [13].

In the United States, the emergence of the modern suburban form—as a standardized urban model with a functionally optimized residential structure—is most closely associated with Levittown. This suburb became synonymous with mass-produced housing models repeated hundreds of times, with little regard for individual needs. In that sense, Levittown represents the first large-scale, mass-produced residential development, constructed between 1947 and 1951. It arose in response to the post-war housing shortage in the United

States and served as a prototype for post-war planned communities [14]. Levittown offered affordable homeownership opportunities for veterans and their families, playing a crucial role in the emergence of the middle class and the growth of post-war consumer culture. As such, it became a symbol of the "American Dream," enabling thousands of families to attain homeownership [15].

In other European countries, suburban development evolved more slowly and under different urban, demographic, and social frameworks. The post-war period marked a significant phase of transformation, characterized by planned urban development and the emergence of various forms of multi-family housing integrated into city structures. One of the most notable urban planning projects was the development of Vällingby, a suburb of Stockholm, conceived as part of Sweden's vision in the 1950s to decentralize the capital. During this period, districts outside Stockholm were rapidly transformed into suburban zones [16]. In Asia, suburbanization occurred later—around the mid-1960s—but at a much larger scale, driven by the need to accommodate massive populations and high urban densities. In contrast to American models, Asian suburbs vary significantly depending on the country, local context, and socio-economic conditions.

4. TYPOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION OF SUBURBS

Suburbanization, as a model of urban planning, represents an inevitable process within the expansion of large cities. Its essential role in shaping global urbanism is indisputable, as it significantly contributes to the formation of contemporary urban spaces. The purpose of typological classification is to identify specific types of suburban development and provide additional details about their built form. This topic has been explored through numerous studies and various approaches to analyzing different suburban forms [17].

Although suburbs are most commonly perceived as homogeneous spaces of standardized single-family housing, their internal structures and developmental models reveal significant typological diversity. Suburban typology can be examined from various perspectives and classified according to different criteria, including socio-economic composition, physical distance from the city center, and infrastructural connectivity to the urban core. This research addresses suburban typology through classification based on geographical context, functional-programmatic organization, and socio-economic structure.

4.1. Classification Based on Geographical Context

The first criterion for suburban classification is geographical context, referring to a comparative analysis of suburban areas in America, Europe, and Asia. Based on an in-depth case study analysis, the first category comprises **American suburbs**, which represent the most dominant suburban type globally. This group is characterized by planned construction on a large scale, low building density, and predominantly single-family housing known as tract housing or cookie-cutter typology. These suburbs often lack well-developed public spaces, or are defined by zoning policies that strictly separate residential from public and commercial zones. Such spatial arrangements lead to a heavy dependence on private automobiles, as public transportation infrastructure is often underdeveloped. This results in ecological challenges and contributes to suburban sprawl. Socially, these environments tend to foster segregation and socio-spatial stratification.

A characteristic example of the American suburban model is Levittown, the first modern, mass-produced residential community built on Long Island, New York. The Levitt and Sons, Inc. company developed a town that became a national symbol of the post-WWII suburban boom. With over 17,000 identical, low-cost houses constructed, Levittown exemplified a preplanned suburban development equipped with supporting infrastructure such as shopping centers, playgrounds, swimming pools, and schools. This made Levittown a prototype for suburban residential planning across the United States [18].





Figures 1,2. American suburbia, Levittown, New York, source: (1)
https://richardnilsen.com/wpcontent/uploads/2024/09/24-broadacre-hell.jpg
(2)https://www.reddit.com/r/Suburbanhell/comments/ual7mw/this_is_levittown_the_firs
t_americanstyle_suburb/?rdt=53539

European models represent planned suburban developments that combine single-family and multi-family housing types with commercial and public spaces. This typology typically includes higher population density, greater vertical development, and more advanced transportation alternatives, particularly well-developed public transit systems. These suburban areas often feature integrated functions and a richer public realm. However, in some cases, there is insufficient connectivity between suburban districts and central urban zones. A key characteristic of European suburbs is the preservation of cultural identity, including local architectural styles and vernacular traditions, which results in greater spatial heterogeneity. Nonetheless, social segregation—including ethnic segregation—is a persistent issue in many European suburbs [19].

A representative example of a European suburban model is Vauban, a neighborhood located on the outskirts of Freiburg, Germany. Built as a sustainable model district on the site of a former French military base, Vauban was developed in 2000 under the influence of the citizens' group Forum Vauban, which advocated for an ecologically responsible urban project. This collaboration between residents and the city government resulted in a masterplan based on the concept of a car-free environment. The community participated in the selection of residents, prioritizing families with children, elderly individuals, and existing Freiburg residents. While Vauban emphasizes residential development and ecological design, it lacks extensive public infrastructure. A section of the district was later developed to accommodate student housing for the University of Freiburg [20].



Figure 3. Aerial view of Vauban neighbourhood in Freiburg, Germany, source: https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2019/9/18/this-neighborhood-in-germany-shows-us-why-american-planned-communities-are-so-abysmal

Asian suburbs, while facing similar demands for large-scale housing solutions as other regions, tend to follow rapid and massive suburbanization patterns that accommodate high population densities. Unlike American models, Asian suburbs are highly heterogeneous, exhibiting a wide range of features depending on the national and local context. They are characterized by very high residential densities and the integration of residential, commercial, administrative, and industrial functions within the same districts [21]. Vertical expansion is a prominent feature, with high-rise apartment towers serving mixed-use purposes—residential, commercial, and public. In Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand, a notable phenomenon is "desakota", referring to regions where rural and urban characteristics coexist, blending agricultural activities with urban functions [22].

A notable example of a planned Asian suburb is Tama New Town, one of Japan's largest housing developments. Initiated in 1965, it emerged as a response to the rapid population influx into Tokyo and the increasing cost of urban land, prompting many to move to more affordable peripheral areas. Located 20 km from Tokyo, Tama New Town is distinguished by a hierarchically organized infrastructure and a diverse range of housing typologies, including both collective and single-family units. Although designed within the framework of functionalist modernism, this suburb demonstrates a strong ability to adapt to cultural housing norms, with a clear focus on social cohesion and accessibility to urban amenities [23].



Figure 4. Aerial view of Tama New Town neighbourhood in Tokyo, Japan, source: https://www.ur-net.go.jp/overseas/achievements/tama.html

4.2. Classification of Suburbs Based on Functional Division

The second criterion by which suburbs can be classified is their functional division, which includes residential, mixed-use, industrial, and commercial (business) models. This typological grouping is based on selected case studies from North America, Canada, and Europe.

Residential suburbs represent the most widespread type, characterized by exclusive residential use. The dominant housing model is individual single-family housing. According to these typological characteristics, Mississauga serves as a typical example of a North American suburban city, formed by tract housing developments comprising large numbers of similar or identical family homes. The city exemplifies planned urban development with an emphasis on uniform residential neighborhoods, spacious front and backyards, and low residential density. Housing typologies include mainly single-family detached homes, as well as townhouses and semi-detached houses. Public spaces are underdeveloped, and residents are heavily reliant on private automobile transportation.





Figures 5, 6. Aerial view of Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, source:(5) https://www.gmaps.com, (6)https://www.reddit.com/r/Suburbanhell/comments/iqsnse/dystopian_suburbia_in_mi ssissauga ontario canada/?rdt=56130

Mixed-use suburbs include residential areas, commercial zones, public services, schools, parks, and even employment centers. These areas are planned to reduce dependency on travel to the city center. A representative example of a well-developed European mixed-use suburb is Vällingby, located on the outskirts of Stockholm. It is characterized by a diversity of housing typologies—both single-family and multi-family dwellings-as well as planned pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, and the creation of public spaces. The suburb was developed as a new concept urban district, known as the ABC city-Arbete-Bostad—Centrum (Work—Housing—Center). The ABC concept aimed to transform each suburban area into a self-contained mini-city that provided all the essential components for living and working-integrating employment, housing, and central urban functions within a single unit [24].



Figure 7. Aerial view of Vallingby, Stockholm, Sweden, source: https://vaxer.stockholm/omraden/hasselby-vallingby-stadsdelsomrade/vallingby/

Industrial suburbs are typically developed near industrial zones to provide housing for workers. A classical example of this suburban type is Irvine, located in southern Orange County, Los Angeles. Initially developed in the 1960s as a company town by the Irvine Company, it was intended to house company employees. Over time, Irvine grew into a city that became home to numerous corporations and universities. The city's urban plan is highly organized, with clearly defined residential and public zones. The development and appearance of the neighborhood are strictly regulated—in some areas, even roof styles, house colors, and landscaping are subject to guidelines. The community includes bike paths, parks, and green belts that connect to ecological reserves. Older neighborhoods such as Northwood, developed independently in the early 1970s, are less regulated and exhibit more diversity in design. Architecturally, homes are mostly typified and designed in the California style. Since the 1960s, properties have been modified and expanded, leading to greater visual variation in the present-day neighborhood.





Figures 8, 9. Aerial view of Irvine, Los Angeles, USA, source: (8) www.gmaps.com (9) https://www.ocregister.com/2023/01/12/irvine-may-change-how-city-officials-are-elected/

Business suburbs represent hybrid business-residential models, developed with a primary focus on corporate and administrative complexes, while also incorporating housing and other facilities within the development [25]. A prominent example of a predominantly commercial suburb with residential elements is La Défense in Paris. Planning for this district began in the late 1950s as part of a broader modernization strategy for the city. Although primarily designed as a business district, La Défense also includes residential areas, mostly situated on its periphery. Housing is spatially separated from the business zone, leading to

only partial functional integration. While La Défense is a successful example of concentrated business activity in a contemporary urban context, it also highlights the limitations of monofunctional planning. The lack of residential and cultural amenities, weak local community integration, and the fragmentation of the urban fabric result in a district that functions more as a business island than as an integral part of the city's urban structure.



Figure 10. View of La Defence, Paris, France, source: https://www.lexpress.fr/societe/justice/le-quartier-de-la-defense-boucle-apres-unappel-evoquant-un-individu-arme 2129628.html?cmp redirect=true

4.3. Classification of Suburbs Based on Socioeconomic Structure

The third criterion for suburban classification pertains to socioeconomic structure. This categorization is derived from selected case studies in Australia, Asia, and Africa. Suburbs may be grouped into three main categories: middle-class suburbs, luxury suburbs, and social housing suburbs.

Middle-class suburbs represent the most prevalent suburban model. A typical example is Craigieburn, a rapidly growing suburb of Melbourne, which addresses the challenges of suburban expansion. The area is characterized by uniform housing design and scale, with dwellings situated on smaller plots, enabling efficient land use and greater housing affordability for many families. Architecturally, the houses exhibit homogeneous features, although recent years have seen a trend toward greater design diversity. Public facilities are strategically zoned and well-integrated with residential areas. The population is composed predominantly of middle-income residents employed in service and administrative sectors, with a strong reliance on private vehicular transport.

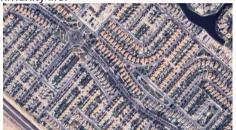




Figures 11, 12: Aerial view of Craigieburn, Melbourn, Australia, source: (11) https://www.gmaps.com (12) https://www.pomsinoz.com/articles.html/where-to-live-in-australia/victoria/craigieburn-melbourne-suburbs-r178/)

Luxury suburbs are urban models that do not differ structurally from middle-class or social housing neighborhoods in terms of organization, but are distinguished by their

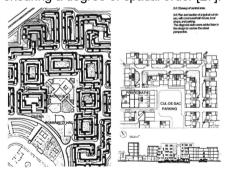
residential typologies. These suburbs consist of single-family housing, often in the form of luxurious villas, and include exclusive amenities such as golf courses, private security, and gated communities with restricted access. An illustrative case is Jumeirah Park in Dubai, a master-planned residential zone covering over 380 hectares and comprising more than 3,000 luxury villas. The villas are designed as freestanding units on individual plots. In an effort to break the architectural monotony, three stylistic variants were introduced: *Heritage style:* Inspired by traditional Arab architectural forms; *Regional style:* A blend of Arab and Islamic elements, featuring flat roofs and terraces to extend outdoor living space; *Legacy style:* Reflecting European influences, with pitched roofs, decorative arches, and classical façades [26]. Unlike earlier phases of suburban development, Jumeirah Park incorporates numerous public and recreational facilities aimed at diversifying the residential model and enhancing community life.





Figures 13,14. Aerial view of Jumeirah Park, Dubai, UAE, source: (13) https://www.gmaps.com (14) https://www.propertyfinder.ae/blog/jumeirah-park/

Social housing suburbs are typically developed as part of state-sponsored housing programs, often characterized by lower construction standards and high levels of socioeconomic segregation. A representative case is the Dar Lamane housing community in the suburban periphery of Casablanca, Morocco. This project, initiated in the 1980s, was designed to provide housing for low-income residents of nomadic and rural origin. It represents a hybrid suburban model, situated in an industrial zone, and structured to include not only residential units but also public urban spaces such as markets, mosques, and communal buildings, thus creating a central node accessible to the entire community. While the area is automobile-oriented, pedestrian and vehicular zones are clearly delineated, ensuring a degree of spatial order [27].





Figures 15,16. The view of Dar Laman, Casablanca, Marocoo, source: https://www.archdaily.com/977864/the-city-outskirts-suburbia-and-low-cost-housing/622105093e4b31b04d00004a-the-city-outskirts-suburbia-and-low-cost-housing-photo

5. DISCUSSION

Based on the conducted research and the analysis of selected case studies, several key conclusions can be drawn; suburbs do not represent homogeneous architectural and urban entities. The typological classification was established according to geographic origin, socioeconomic structure, and functional differentiation. Following these typological criteria, the following characteristics can be identified: The most significant differences among suburban models are observed based on geographic location. According to this criterion: American suburbs are characterized by predominantly residential typologies, consisting mainly of single-family homes with private gardens, and are heavily reliant on the automobile as the primary mode of mobility. These environments are defined by low population densities and a limited presence of public spaces. European suburbs are typically planned settlements that incorporate a mix of multi-family and single-family housing, exhibit greater urban compactness, and possess a more developed public transportation network. Asian suburbs demonstrate a high level of architectural and urban rationality, marked by high-density developments, residential towers, and a mixed-use organization where residential, commercial, and public functions are often integrated within the same building or urban block. The greatest similarities across suburban models are found in terms of socioeconomic categorization, including luxury suburbs, middle-class suburbs, and social housing developments. Additionally, commonalities can also be identified among suburbs grouped according to functional criteria. The residential suburb remains the most prevalent suburban typology, typically characterized by a limited range of functions. However, in recent years, a shift has occurred, with an increasing incorporation of public and commercial facilities within these areas. This evolution reflects a transition toward a *mixed-use model*, which integrates various forms of housing, along with public and commercial functions. *Industrial suburbs*, originally developed in proximity to production facilities, may range from being primarily residential to mixed-use environments. Business suburbs, on the other hand, represent growth areas of large urban centers, predominantly shaped by corporate and administrative functions, often with limited residential components.

6. CONCLUSION

Suburbanization, as a model of urban planning, represents an inevitable process accompanying the expansion of large cities. Suburbs emerge as a response to increasing housing demands, forming residential zones located outside urban cores, yet not fully integrated within rural areas. This form of settlement thus embodies a hybrid residential model situated between the "urban" and the "rural."

As a modern form of housing, the suburb first appeared during the Industrial Revolution in the mid-19th century in the United States and the United Kingdom, as a retreat for the upper social classes from overcrowded, inhumane, and unsanitary working-class dwellings. However, suburbs experienced full-scale expansion during the mid-20th century, driven by the sharp rise in housing needs following World War II. This phase was pivotal for the development of suburban areas in America, Europe, and Asia alike. Based on the analysis of numerous case studies across different continents, the following conclusions can be drawn: suburbs can be classified according to various typological characteristics. In this research, the classification was conducted based on geographic affiliation, socio-economic

structure, and functional division. The most notable differences among suburban models emerge in relation to geographic context. American suburbs are predominantly residential, characterized by single-family houses with private gardens, automobile dependence, limited public spaces, and low population densities. European suburbs are typically planned settlements that incorporate elements of collective housing, greater urban compactness, and a more developed public transport system, while also integrating mixed-use functions and varied housing types. Asian suburbs display high architectural rationality and dense residential patterns. The dominant residential form includes high-rise apartment towers, with mixed-use development that integrates residential, commercial, and public functions—even within a single structure. Despite geographic differences, similarities among suburban models are observed in relation to socio-economic factors. These include luxury suburbs, middle-class developments, and social housing estates. In terms of functional classification, residential suburbs remain the most dominant, typically composed of single-family dwellings. However, in recent years, there has been a shift toward including public and commercial amenities within these areas. This evolution reflects a transition toward mixed-use suburban forms, which combine various housing types with public and business facilities. Industrial suburbs, often developed near manufacturing complexes, may take the form of primarily residential or mixed-use neighborhoods. Business suburbs represent expansion zones of major cities, marked by a dominance of commercial activity and a lack of adequate residential infrastructure. Suburbs, as a form of housing, may manifest as various architectural and urban models, each developed to meet the residential needs of local populations.

Depending on their geographic context, suburbs reveal both advantages and drawbacks in terms of urban planning. Identifying the spatial and organizational challenges, as well as issues of quality, remains a key task for future urban and architectural solutions, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the quality of life and adapting suburbs to contemporary living requirements. In this context, future research should focus on design-based challenges, with an emphasis on development strategies that support sustainable mobility and the introduction of new housing typologies—designed to respond to emerging family structures and evolving lifestyles.

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