

SUBURBAN SYNTAX
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Current theories of urban design are preoccupied with the forms and values of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cities, and disdainful of suburbia which remains without respectable discussion. The wishful thinking implicit in this is curiously reminiscent of the Modern Movement; for whereas the Modern Movement proposed an ideal new world to convert society from its suburban aspirations, the new urbanists, such as the Kriers, propose an idealised old world. The reality is that suburbia has become the residential convention of the twentieth century, just as the terrace was of the eighteenth and nineteenth. So, paradoxically, some of the most pressing issues of urbanism are really suburban ones, and it is to the language of suburbia that we should be addressing ourselves. Some would argue that the essence of suburbia is its formlessness and to suggest that it has its own language is to contradict its fantasy of escape from the community of the city. But that vision of concealment in arcadia has been degraded into the pot-pourri of repetitive and monotonous individuality, for which suburbia is reviled. Both the laissez faire of speculative development and the public initiatives of the New Towns have failed to offer a convincing alternative vision, particularly in relation to densities which have increased in response to higher land costs. There is no landscape theory comparable to the Picturesque, but instead massive planting is intended to veil the repetitiveness. The common experience of the traveller, particularly in the later New Towns such as Milton Keynes, is of a continuous semi-rural nowhere through which buildings appear haphazardly until an estate is reached itself a large cul de sac.

The phraseology of New Town planning is peppered with terms like 'urban design philosophy', 'sense of place', and 'visual order', yet it was only at the end of their abruptly truncated development periods that the designers of such New Towns as Warrington and Milton Keynes came to realise the significance of roads as the key to suburban experience.(1)

The descending hierarchy of road systems is the latent structure of suburban design, and the purpose of my argument is to explore how that system may be visually represented, so as to fulfill, with quite specific images, such vague terms as 'visual order'.

In taking the roads as the basis, the highway engineers' assumptions are both accepted and subverted. Vehicles are accepted as dominant on major roads which are distinguished from roads where people live. This, so far, is the conventional wisdom, but beyond this we have to question the extent to which the criteria of travel should prevail over the criteria for making places in the road system as a whole.

In the conventional hierarchy of district distributors local distributors and access roads, only about one third of road frontage is directly accessible from buildings and it is this factor more than any other which determines the relative diffuseness of modern development. We must ask ourselves whether the road as street can claim a greater proportion of the system than current highway engineering allows. Our study suggests that it can.(2)

What follows is not a prescription; suburban planning can take many forms, it is just one possible kind of invention, and this belief underlines the fact that planning should be a process of design fired by an aesthetic, not a rule of thumb promoted by geography graduates .

The sense of being nowhere in suburban road systems arises from the dominance of travel over destinations and the assumption that only the destinations are 'places', the roads between them, not. In Kevin Lynch's terms, there is no 'artificial typography' to tell you where you are in relation to the system as a whole except in the crude sense that the roads get narrower and slower. The illusion of landscape associated with major roads is usually insufficiently deliberate and the exits to where people live are unexpressed. There is a failure to distinguish between the different places in the hierarchy and the thresholds between them.

The road hierarchy

In conventional road planning the major distributor (the equivalent of the grid road system in Milton Keynes), is connected to housing by local distributors, A. Our proposal is to eliminate the local distributors and substitute boulevards directly fronted by buildings, connected at intervals of about 350m to the distributor, B

For this to work these connections must not be too frequent to compromise the efficiency of the distributor or too far apart to overload the boulevards. Our proposal challenges existing standards in both respects, increasing journey time by only a few minutes. But it is likely to save about .75m.of road and associated infrastructure per dwelling (about £500/dwelling). The boulevards offer a 'street' system continuous like the distributor, but slower so as to be attractive to users, rather than travellers, and associated with the highest density and lowest car ownership, with bus routes, shops and light industry and accommodation mainly for those without cars.

The access roads connected to the boulevards are more conventional. But the pattern suggested is a cellular one. Such a cellular system offers the continuity which a system of cul-de-sac estates does not. Devices for reducing vehicle speed, such as constrictions of width and changes of surface ensure that such access routes are less attractive to travellers than the boulevards. Interestingly, such a pattern of roads fits the pattern of perimeter development around schools and recreational space which we have proposed elsewhere, C. Even if only 20 per cent of the total developable land is 'public open space' (including school land), it is possible for all dwellings to be within about 150 m of it, a real garden city relationship.

The road pattern itself is not only exceptionally economic but the distinctions between different parts of the system are easily made recognisable and views of 'open space' are readily obtained through the housing to help orientation and create surprise.

Places and thresholds

The set of drawings which follows proposes an architectural repertoire capable of describing the places and thresholds latent in the pattern of roads. Instead of roads being the boundaries of sites, A, each site should straddle a road to contain it as a place, B, C. Consequently the boundaries of the sites are parks and common land so each site demands an interpretation of this quintessentially suburban situation, D.

The main distributors

The image is of a road through landscape. The junction is made an urban intervention in this arcadia to herald the entrance to a community. For this to work the illusion of landscape must be complete, and the contrast deliberate, E, F.

The boulevard

Instead of more landscape verges, this is definitely a street, potentially dense and relatively urban if fronted by flats in three to four storeys rather than houses with less scale. It is a place of arrival as well as a road to travel along, where you would expect to find some local shops, small businesses and a bus route, G, H.

Cross roads

Towers mark the main axis of the road. End houses are adapted and mitred to frame the junction, K, L.

Entrance to a residential area

Flats form a gateway through which the diminished scale of family housing is discovered. Parkland is glimpsed beyond this threshold and offers another point of reference, I, J.

A street opens into a green

The end houses turn the corner. Their facade brickwork becomes a brick retaining wall which engages the entrance porches of villas around the green, M, N.

Entrances to vehicle courts

Semi-detached or end of terrace houses form the gateways to the final vehicle destinations of the scheme around which houses and gardens are clustered, O, P, Q, R.

References

1. Hugh Canning, Chief Architect and Planner of Warrington, wrote of the 'city building' function of roads in his introduction to our Warrington project, AJ, 13 September 1978.
2. Terence Bendixson broached this issue in 'Slow Speed Roads, AJ, 10 October 1977.