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Bad Spaces: Rethinking Suburbs and Justice in a Comparative Framework *Mauvais Espaces: Repenser les périphéries et la justice dans une structure comparative*

Gary W. McDonough, Professor and Chair - Program in Growth and Structure of Cities
Bryn Mawr College - Bryn Mawr PA 19010-2899 – USA

While the formation of suburban spaces worldwide has taken many forms, from shanty towns to high-rises to elite gated communities, these places share an ambivalent, often negative image within metropolitan thought and planning. Despite the popular movement from cities and countryside that create them, such diverse periurban formations are nonetheless criticized for aesthetic failures, for their absence of sites of articulation and community, for their spacialization of multiple features of injustice/segregation and their unhealthy competition with cities themselves. Surprisingly vehement images of fear of suburb and suburban resonate from Latin America to contemporary France to American political and social thought that identifies suburbs as potential crucibles for racism, class struggle and religious fundamentalism. Moreover, the environmental critique of sprawl identifies suburbs as problems for the planet as well as local development.

Such widespread condemnations force us to examine critically the issues of spatial justice that suburbs actually embody. In many cases, we find that suburbs are actually mixed rather than monolithic, juxtaposing if not combining class and ethnic groups as well as segregating. Despite their relatively short history (a point often overlooked in invidious comparisons with cities), suburbs have also developed centers of multiple association, including environmental activism and lively dialogues that critique suburban form and function. Many suburbs, in fact, look like the cities with whom they and their residents are involved despite public discussion that emphasizes their contrasts and competition.

Indeed, if we recognize suburbanization as a part of metropolitan vision and growth, we realize that displacement of social and cultural issues onto bad places has long existed in cities as a way of framing arguments spatially – and perhaps precluding effective solutions to urban issues. Drawing on comparative fieldwork and readings from the U.S., France, Hong Kong and Latin America, this paper argues instead that rereading suburbs as crucibles of social justice rather than easy answers opens up an important discussion of space and justice in changing metropolises.