



OpenAIR@RGU

The Open Access Institutional Repository at Robert Gordon University

<http://openair.rgu.ac.uk>

Citation Details

Citation for the version of the work held in 'OpenAIR@RGU':

MACDONALD, S., 2011. Suburbanomics – creativity and innovation at the edge. Available from *OpenAIR@RGU*. [online]. Available from: <http://openair.rgu.ac.uk>

Full citation:

MACDONALD, S., 2011. Suburbanomics – creativity and innovation at the edge. Paper presented at: Future Development of Suburbs Lecture Series: International Approaches, Ideas and Experiences combined with National Knowledge. 17 November 2011 – 1 March 2012. Helsinki. Unpublished.

Copyright

Items in 'OpenAIR@RGU', Robert Gordon University Open Access Institutional Repository, are protected by copyright and intellectual property law. If you believe that any material held in 'OpenAIR@RGU' infringes copyright, please contact openair-help@rgu.ac.uk with details. The item will be removed from the repository while the claim is investigated.

SUBURBANOMICS: CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION AT THE EDGE

Originally presented at the Future Development of Suburbs Lecture Series: International Approaches, Ideas and Experiences combined with National Knowledge, Helsinki, Finland December 2011

Abstract

The basis of this paper is that we have prioritised the city centre and its planning sometimes to the impoverishment of the “suburbs” or outlying areas, despite the fact that most of us live there. Away from the headline projects at the city’s core with its appropriation of architecture to the experience economy and the interests of tourism and retail, there is evidence of creativity and innovation in outlying neighbourhoods, estates and suburbs. Using an expanded range of references from urbanism to service design, cultural studies and environmental writing, Glasgow is taken as a case in point because its large-scale post-industrial regeneration through the use of architecture to brand cultural festivals and centres, is perceived to have overshadowed interesting projects at the periphery. A number of case-studies from different suburban contexts are deployed to illuminate key developments, especially in relation to co-design and changes in consumption and to offer exemplars. These are used to indicate the need for more suburban studies – for *Suburbanomics*.

Introduction

The Trouble with City Planning, says Kristina Ford in her new book of that name, is that it has failed to involve the very people it is meant to serve, that is, ordinary citizens. Ford was director of planning in New Orleans and is in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. But I don’t think that it takes a disaster to find creative and innovative ways of involving people in improving their environment; and that includes the suburbs where most people happen to live. In that sense I do not think that the suburbs are as toxic or such a problem as some people make out. Indeed, some commentators, like Clay Sharky, attribute suburbanisation positively with the growth of a new economy - the huge increase in the number of people paid to think and talk rather than produce or transport objects, which has happened due to the weakening of traditional uses of free time. People are watching less TV, creating what Sharky calls “cognitive surplus” (2010) - opening up flows of production and organisation, especially how people make choices. Similarly, academics like Robert Bruegmann (2006) have argued that whilst sprawl has had a bad press it, nonetheless, has given us privacy, mobility and choice.

Hence the title “Suburbanomics”, which raises the idea of wants, needs and the use of resources and patterns of production and consumption. It also challenges the exclusivity of Urban Design - seen by many as the solution to all ills - as a unitary discourse and connects it to wider environmental, economic, social and cultural interests. In this presentation I will draw upon the wider design field, including innovations in design thinking, service design and co-design and production, as well as social and cultural studies. The aim is to look at how people – non-professional citizens - can help make

improvements to the public realm. That includes people from diverse ethnic backgrounds as, increasingly, the suburbs become multi-cultural adding to the challenge to promote place-making as a way of rebalancing the over-emphasis on city centres. I'll also offer some strategies. I should also add that I am not a designer and come at this from quite a different angle.

The New (dead) Urbanism

Urban Design has reached a dead end. So says American critic and architect Michael Sorkin in his recent book, *All Over The Map* (2011). According to Sorkin we are trapped between *The Truman Show* and *Blade Runner* – between New Urbanism and Post Urbanism. Sorkin believes that what he sees as a relentless narrowing of Urban Design to a belle lettristic or academic paradigm – the paradigm of writing – has served to distance us both from architecture itself and from its primary focus, the interaction of space and habitation. In a devastating critique of the evolution of Urban Design from its origins in the mid 1950s to the present day and the conflict between its proclaimed social mission and a dogmatic formalism, Sorkin ranges on Urban Design's narrowness (and New Urbanism's prescriptiveness in particular) citing Kevin Lynch's distinction between Urban Design and a more expansive idea of "city design". Lynch argued for a discipline more attuned to the city's complex ecologies, its contending interests and actors, its elusive and layered sites, and for complex readings, unavailable within the discipline of architecture, that would allow the city to achieve its primary social objective as the setting for varied and often unpredictable human behaviours. Making those interconnections in the context of urbanism or suburbanism, reaching out from the centre to the periphery - the edge, is central to that idea and to this presentation.

Although Sorkin attacks Urban Design and New Urbanism for its perceived academicism or literariness a recent development in the academic world in Scotland, *The Values of Environmental Writing Research Network*, aims to raise levels of critical academic exchange and public debate about the links between environmental literacy, and wider patterns of pro-environment behavioural and lifestyle change. The network's focus is on Creative Environmental Writing, which seeks to prompt diverse forms of environmental action and social engagement in the context of contemporary environmental change. That is useful in widening this discussion on the suburbs and understanding how people experience their environment, whether urban or suburban, in different ways depending upon their social, cultural and economic circumstances. Politics and policies can enable good spaces but they can also be exclusive. If all citizens are to be comfortable in and identify with the spaces and places they inhabit, then the full diversity of their experience has to be considered. So, as well as talking about cities in a more convivial way, it means adopting a more human-centred design approach. The language of design thinking and co-design has to come out of its professional ghetto, to be expanded and normalised to become a prerequisite of civic life; tools of citizenship if you like. We also have to connect up different theories: Lynch with Landry and present-day ideas of creativity and innovation (Landry, 2000, 2006); in that context link Rogerson and Rices'

notion of “sensory urbanism”; and encompass what Gallagher calls the “non-physical dynamics of place” (2009).

Where are the Suburbs?

By the suburbs what I am referring to is “an area at the edge of the city”, which is one of the two definitions in Robert Cowan’s “The Dictionary of Urbanism”. The second definition of the suburbs is an “irrelevant backwater”. But, according to Kingston University’s Centre for Suburban Studies (2011), the definition of suburbia now embraces a wide range of developments from New Towns to Council Estates. National census returns record over 80% of the British population living in the suburbs. It is clear that the old stereotypical associations are no longer relevant to these vibrant sites of social mobility and ethnic diversity, which offer a model for local living in a global society. The distinction becomes clearer when you look at this economically. As David Harvey has commented it is an urban myth that when we have got the economy right then we can spend money to get our cities sorted. He says the reverse is true; getting things economically right is the path to economic change and economic development; the city is not secondary to this. I would also add that getting the suburbs right, not seeing them as secondary but central to success, is key.

What I am really talking about is the shared public realm, not just public spaces, parks, streets and neighbourhoods, but also public services – schools, health centres, libraries; social spaces or “living democratic spaces” as they have been called. Talking about the public realm in this broad, equitable way is useful because, as well as admitting a fuller range of architectural and design possibilities, it is more than the sum of private interests and must serve people with different needs, backgrounds and interests - equally and simultaneously.

Glasgow

Of course, the form of the city – its centre and its suburbs and periphery - rises from the convergence of legislation, imagination, ambition and resistance. It is further compounded by patterns of consumption, use and inhabitation. This complex of forces has had a pretty thorough workout in Glasgow especially in relation to the City’s efforts in regeneration, and the perceived gulf between the centre and the periphery. This reached a peak in the series of cultural festivals that marked Glasgow’s post-industrial transformation from the Garden Festival in the late Eighties, Glasgow European City of Culture in 1990 to UK City of Architecture and Design in 1999. These developments were seen by critics as city-centric and ignored the periphery. By the periphery what was meant was Glasgow’s large social housing estates built for populations of 50,000 – the size of small towns - but lacking the amenities of small townships. Likewise Helsinki.

There are other similarities with Glasgow and Helsinki. In terms of size: Glasgow has a population of 700,000 and a metropolitan population of 1.5million; Helsinki 600,000 and 1.1million, respectively. Given that Helsinki has also been a European City of Culture and now a World Capital of Design, it would be useful to ask to what extent Helsinki has

managed to use these festivals to reach out beyond the centre? In Glasgow's case what was a focus on regeneration and architecture and design has now evolved into a tourist-led consumerist campaign, *Glasgow with Style*, (its counterpart is HelsinkiStyle) that appropriates architecture and culture as part of the "experience economy" with the full-blown exploitation of the City's Mackintosh heritage. This relates to Hal Foster's (2011) account of the Art-Architecture Complex (a play on Eisenhower's Military-Industry Complex). For Foster this is a primary site of image-making and space-shaping in the cultural economy as cities, Glasgow and Helsinki being no exceptions, turn to the art-architecture connection to attract visitors and inward investment and to promote city-branding through festivals and the like. Imageability is paramount in this context with visual art-oriented architects like Zaha Hadid and her new Riverside Museum in Glasgow being one example of the connection of art and architecture in the post-industrial economy of culture and entertainment. It certainly offers an illuminating background to discuss what is happening beyond the centre, particularly in terms of public engagement.

Post-industrial City

Glasgow, like many other cities, including Helsinki, has many layers of spatial organisation and use. As well as being one of the best preserved Victorian cities in the UK it has within it fragments of Roman, medieval, Georgian, industrial, suburban – including garden suburbs, subtopian, modernist, neighbourhoods, encircled villages and other patterns that make up the contemporary city. It also has, according to critic Owen Hatherley in his biting critique of UK architecture as consumption, its fair share of mild-modernism and pseudo-modernism. After World War2, confronted with the need for slum clearance on a massive scale and to address issues of overspill, Glasgow embarked on the creation of Modernist new towns, most famously Cumbernauld and East Kilbride – so there are similarities with Espoo and Vantaa - as well as new housing estates on its periphery, some encircling the Victorian suburbs and engulfing smaller neighbourhoods and communities. Glasgow is a typical post-industrial or de-industrialised city.

This is quite different from the North American definition of "sprawl" or depiction of the suburbs as residential areas some distance from the centre of the city. While Glasgow's present form might raise questions about the nature and delineation of suburbia, and while issues of dislocation of centre and periphery and economic distortion may remain, that does not necessarily mean I regard the suburbs as either negative or toxic. What I hope to do in this presentation is show some examples of how these assumptions and difficulties have been bridged. In doing so I am drawing on three areas of my own experience. Firstly, as the former Director of Scotland's National Architecture Centre and attempts to reach out and innovate beyond the confines of the city centre. Secondly, my present work in a School of Architecture and supporting research that is practice-based and interdisciplinary. And, thirdly, linked to that, identifying examples of creative and innovative practice. Although Finland is economically and culturally different from Scotland and the UK I aim to touch on some things of global concern, namely, what Anna Minton in her book *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the*

Twenty-first Century City, refers to as the untold story of social housing - “hidden poverty” and ghettoisation. I’ll also touch on Modernism and how we might learn to love it and generally how we might democratise architecture to alleviate perceived issues relating to our suburbs.

One of the interesting manifestations of the current financial crisis is the re-taking of public spaces for assembly and protest whether Tahir Square Cairo or St Pauls Cathedral in London. This is headline, city-centre focussed stuff. But how does this relate to the rehabilitation of the public realm elsewhere outside the centre? In particular, how can we focus attention on what is happening in the suburbs. How do you get into this debate and how can you effect change? What skills and capabilities do you need and how do you get them? And, whom do you get them from?

Changing the Narrative

There is, however, a radical, emerging field of practice that responds to the changing social landscape and resists the narrow and confrontational way in which architecture, design art and city planning are often discussed. At a philosophical level Ian Borden (2006), has provided us with “thirteen tactics for the good life”, for a new kind of urban space that is diametrically opposite to the space of professionals, drawings, geometry, static objects and urban management. He argues for a public realm in which the public can order and re-order activities in a much more flexible way that would give a totally different construction to public space.

At a practical level this was spearheaded by the Lighthouse’s *Access to Architecture* programme, part of the Scottish Government’s Policy on Architecture and which has involved thousands of participants in projects across Scotland. Not least, it has initiated numerous Scotland-wide projects focussed on enabling local communities in partnership with built environment practitioners to take greater control of their immediate environment. This new form of practice is gathering worldwide momentum and, to cite just one reference, is clearly set out in the appropriately titled *Design and Landscape for People*, Clare Cumberlidge and Lucy Musgraves’ (2007) useful attempt to bridge the disconnected worlds of planning, politics and commerce. It does this by exploring the ground underneath the centre of local conflicts. Their approach is marked by an awareness of symbolic value and the significance of meaning within place. There are three aspects to this; a belief in the effectiveness of the small action, an emphasis on local distinctiveness and values and an interdisciplinary approach, the latter demonstrating that regeneration is not just a job for planners and architects. To those three aspects I would add a fourth, Transformation Design, an approach in which design thinking and co-design are core, and in which the stakeholders are considered as integral to the process and no stakeholder is regarded as more important than the other.

Thinking Transformation

What I want to do is to link transformation/design thinking/co-design approach in several ways to the policy context. Firstly, in the context of creating a more inclusive approach to design, the Commission on Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in England, has set out five high priorities, including: 1. Doing more than you need to; 2. exceeding regulatory responsibility; 3. consult local people building a track record of engagement and listening; 4. importantly, use imaginative methods of involvement and use plain language; and 5. promote environmental equality and cohesive, sustainable communities. The key in those five priorities I believe is how you innovate imaginative ways of engagement. In many senses, none of this is new, and a lot of work – certainly in countering exclusion - has been done by a wide of range organizations in the UK like the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Changing Places, The Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust, and the Women’s Design Service. And, the problems of urban regeneration have been extensively analysed and critiqued very recently by John Houghton and Anne Powers in *Jigsaw Cities*, which used Birmingham as an example. And, attempts have been made to address the need for more creativity and innovation and an expanded set of capabilities by protagonists like Landry (2000) in the context of the Creative City by offering a toolkit of ideas. However, moving from the conceptual to the practical has not been easy. The difficulty with this area, I believe, is that it has not kept up with the really radical developments in design thinking, in education and in service delivery. There is a transformation going in those areas that could dramatically alter our approach.

Wikipedia, in its definition of Design Thinking, describes design" as the "transformation of existing conditions into preferred ones". Design Thinking is, then, usefully linked to an improved future. At the same time, the term is being used to define a way of thinking that produces transformative innovation or an empathetic, people-led approach to problem-solving. The Helsinki Design Lab (HDL) is an example of this approach (2011). Again, however, there is nothing particularly new in all of this - the thinking processes of designers have been the subject of study for over two decades. Also, the “fuzzy front end” of human-centered design has been developing rapidly since before the end of the twentieth century; likewise movements that encourage participation early in the front end, largely because this is seen as necessary to drive human-centered product development. The latter movement has also prioritized creativity as a means of involving end-users early in the development process, whilst evolving strategies such as co-design and emphasizing the need for tools to take this forward. In this context customers have evolved into users, and users into co-designers. What has not happened is the wholesale transfer of this to solving problems, including exclusion, in the public realm, in neighbourhoods and suburbs.

More recently, and much more prominently, The UK Design Council’s Red Team identified a new community of practice that was building on traditional design skills to address social and economic issues and which used the design process to enable a wide range of disciplines and stakeholders to collaborate in what it termed “Transformation Design”. Apart from underlining the effectiveness of the interdisciplinary approach that is central to Transformation Design, the RED Team also set out some challenges for

designers in terms of the need to apply design thinking in broader social economic and political contexts, to collaborate fruitfully with other disciplines, and champion human-centered design. In some senses Service Design is the child of Transformation Design; Service Design is process that can help design services, like products and systems, in a strategic and practical way. The point is it offers an authentic way of actively engaging people in transforming their own environment as it can integrate specialist knowledge about one area with a broader understanding of several others. In the commercial world this recognition has been further enhanced with a range of new technologies to promote innovation; if only they could be re-focussed upon the issues of the public realm and the promotion of better places. By way of illustration, I am going to present six case studies.

1. Cranhill Watertower

Elements of what I am proposing were acted out when I was the director of the Lighthouse by its education and access to architecture teams. What they did was locate Service Design, design thinking and co-design within an educational approach that put participants and expert practitioners on the same level. One of the most interesting was the Cranhill Watertower Project. Cranhill is a post-war social housing estate and like similar places is dominated by a huge Modernist water tower. Loved by architects, they are hated by the local people. The Cranhill Watertower project had its origins in the education programme for Glasgow UK City of Architecture 1999. A group of local people came to Glasgow 1999 asking if something could be done with the watertower, to improve their environment. That simple request kicked off one of the most interesting public art programmes ever, with local people, including kids, working with architects and designers to produce a really transformative design that, as well as changing attitudes to place, attracted a nationwide publicity to an area not accustomed to receiving a positive press. It became a model for other parts of the city and further afield, as well as becoming the inspiration for an innovative on-line education programme part of suite of web-based tools, within the REAL lifelong learning project based in Glasgow. It is very much a living project and is an authentic demonstration of the importance of an awareness of symbolic value and the significance of meaning within place. It also underlines Musgrave and Cumberlidges' approach: belief in the effectiveness of the small action; an emphasis on local distinctiveness and values; and an interdisciplinary approach. It is also an example, at the level of home and suburbia, of a site of empowerment. Most, importantly, its legacy is an enduring local identity.

2. Pidgin Perfect

The name of this group of ex Strathclyde University architecture students, Pidgin Perfect, is a play on patois and good English, so literally bringing together different languages, people and ideas. They are also part of the legacy of community lighting projects. They work with communities to make changes in their communities, putting the community at the heart of place-making projects. What is different is that they use fun ways to get everyone working in the community like tea parties, jam making sessions and pop-up cinema. Behind this, however, is a serious service design proposal

that at once demystifies the design process whilst offering a clear seven stage means of engagement that is being used increasingly by local authorities to help consultation.

3. Ice-cream Architecture

Pidgin Perfect collaborate with another group called Ice-cream Architecture. Ice Cream vans (do you have them in Helsinki?) are the life-blood of many outlying communities in Glasgow. They are travelling vans that sell everyday necessities such as milk and bread as well as ice-cream. In fact, it has been the subject of a film by Bill Forsyth, *Comfort and Joy* about ice-cream wars in the city. Anyway, by using a travelling van or shop Ice-cream Architecture aim to reach out to neighbourhoods and suburbs to break down barriers that not only spatial but also professional. The van offers a focus, a space and quite literally a vehicle for connecting up people and ideas.

Both Pigin Perfect and Ice-Cream Architecture are part of The New Wave: The Community Consultant. Community engagement has now become an essential part of planning law. The stuffy image of the town hall and a cup of tea approach is quickly becoming an inadequate form of communication as the public become more insistent in participating in the development. Design practices that show an enthusiasm to roll up their sleeves and engage people on a more meaningful level, designing playful workshops with adults and children, are viewed more favourably by the community. In Scotland practices such as Collective Architecture in Glasgow, who were involved in the Watertower project have consistently shown its benefits. Chris Stuart founder of the practice explains:

“Community consultation was not new and has previously been an important part of regeneration in Glasgow. For us however, it had not been placed at the heart of the design process. In the beginning most of our work was in Glasgow's peripheral estates, which were being demolished or seriously altered. The waste from this process, through the loss of embodied energy and the unhappiness of the communities, led us to an approach, which combined community participation and sustainability. Crucial to that process was that the community took ownership of the project and cared for it. This would lead to a building with longevity, but more importantly a home that would be enjoyed.”

So why has community consultation not been adopted in a far more proactive way, and why has its time now come? During the Boom times of the Noughties, the pace of development was so great it didn't allow much time for deliberation with the public. In a developer driven market consultation has been seen as an inconvenience and an added risk. The industry perhaps placed too much emphasis on celebrating buildings that photographed well, rather than on what they engendered.

4. Govanhill

Govanhill is a Victorian suburb in the South of Glasgow comprised mostly of sandstone tenements which are the topological of the City . Although widely believed to be in decline Govanhill has a rich history. The area has always attracted new migrant communities with significant waves of Jewish, Irish, South Asian and most recently Eastern European migrants. This wealth of cultural history has brought a rich and dynamic quality of experience for those who live here. However tensions and conflict have emerged where lifestyles clash and there are no meaningful mediation mechanisms. Many people including those whose association with the area goes back generations face challenges of poverty, worklessness and poor health. The struggle to address slum-housing conditions has led regeneration activity for the past 30 years.

The Govanhill Baths opened in 1917 and contained hot baths in the upper storey and three swimming pools on the ground floor. There was a seating gallery around one of the pools for spectators attending events such as galas. There was also a wash-house or "steamie" at the rear of the building, which was converted to a launderette in 1971. After the council closed the baths, the campaign to save Govanhill Baths began in December January 2001 which resulted in an occupation of the building from March 17 until August 7, 2001 when police removed the protesters and boarded up the pool. The community campaigned for the redevelopment and reopening of the facilities and the Govanhill Baths Community Trust (GBCT) was established and organises fundraising events, sends out regular newsletters and runs the highly popular Govanhill Baths Open days in which members of the public are shown round the building for free.

The Centre for Community Practice (CCP) was then launched in December 2009, as a social enterprise that aims to promote holistic regeneration through community based learning and research. It is positioned as a knowledge exchange mechanism which promotes applied research as a transferable community resource. In turn the knowledge generated can inform developments in other localities. The CCP was developed as a partnership between Govanhill Baths Community Trust and the University of Strathclyde Departments of Architecture and Sociology. These departments have particular interests and knowledge in fields that are relevant to Govanhill. The Department of Architecture has an interest in the physical and social dimensions of sustainable urban regeneration. The Department of Sociology has expertise in equalities issues, particularly related to race and collective agency.

After a successful campaign the Baths will reopen as a Wellbeing Centre and work has now started with that aim. This will provide a social and learning space that is valued by the diverse range of people who live, work and visit this dynamic and diverse locality. This space and opportunities provided have been developed in response to the interests, cultures and imaginations that already exist in the area. Its over-arching focus is the promotion of health and wellbeing through employment and vocational learning. This is premised on the 'social model of health', which takes a holistic view of health as it connects to all aspects of our physical, intellectual and spiritual lives. Key in this evolution of community activism has been the role of

architects, sociologists, artists and others in working as co-equals with local people. This, of course, has meant consulting, but also involving people in design workshops, using performance art, staging food festivals, open days and other mechanisms to raise public awareness.

5. The Scottish Renaissance Towns Initiative - Neilston

The Scottish Renaissance Towns Initiative, whose strapline is “thinking big acting small”, is based on a concept developed at Carnegie Mellon University and is a response to the challenges facing small-town Scotland and, you could say in the same breath, the suburbs. Basically, the objective is to enable communities to re-imagine their town, to capture a unique, design-led, long-term vision for its future and to build the skills and partnerships to deliver it. There are three simple ingredients that must be in place for the renaissance approach to work; a willing local authority; a community ready and asking for a new vision for their place; and some resources to support the programme.

Neilston, a mixed suburban community on Glasgow’s edge, is an interesting case-study in several respects, not least its emphasis, like Govanhill, on building social capital. It also benefited from the local agency of Pauline Gallagher, a kind of Jane Jacobs of suburbia, who has history of working in community planning. And, the initiative like HDL’s Hämeenlinna project placed a strong emphasis on working with young people. The Neilston programme utilised the social capital already present in the community – strong community networks which had become stronger around the work of the Community Council, campaign groups, tenants and residents’ associations, the Development Trust, and the myriad of sporting and interest groups already - to one extent or another – creating the demand for change. It also saw that young people did not have a recognised and accessible stake in this - their use of the public realm is often a cause for complaint and are notoriously hard to reach. To address this dedicated outreach and workshops were led by the Lighthouse Access to Architecture programme. This work needs time and the investment of particular skills, to enable a transient group to articulate and champion their issues in ways they find appropriate. Taking the long view suggested below, these younger citizens are being formed for their role in whatever community they will find themselves in. The creation of new civic capacity is fundamental and these are key players. Working with them is not an optional extra to the ‘real’ work of the programme.

Gallagher and the Neilston project have a lot to say about transformational design, which was employed at every stage of this initiative but she is especially interested in the fact that although places change, people’s needs on the whole remain the same. They may no longer meet at the market or at the factory gate or in the corner shop. They travel greater distances to entertainment, services and employment that were once on their doorstep. This ‘thinning out’ of locally based encounters leaves places bereft of people. The challenge for designers is to reintensify this occupation

of space, not so much in festivals and programmed events (although these are important) but in condensing and enhancing the space in which face to face encounters may take place in everyday situations. Thus the school gate, the bus stop, the sheltered street corner and the routes between them become more significant than the set-piece intervention. In this way, places themselves become generators of the bonds and networks that grow social capital. As well as presenting a “charter” to the local authority that encompasses the aspirations of the community Neilston’s next project is focussed on the school gates. School gates are not in the lexicon of urban studies but in suburban communities they are often now the sole place where people congregate. What this means is that unfortunately they have become preoccupied with health and safety and traffic management concerns. The Neilston initiative aims to exploit the potential of school gates as a space that maximises encounters and intercourse between people in the community to become a rich site of interaction.

6. Cardross Seminary

The link between the centre and periphery is hugely important but so too are the connections at suburbia’s edgelands. Located in the edge of the Greater Glasgow conurbation, St Peters Seminary is a disused and dilapidated structure originally built to a striking modernist design. Currently listed as a site of ‘special architectural and historical interest’ to the nation, it is said to be Scotland’s finest example of modernist architecture. The aim of the ‘Invisible College’ project, which was shown at the 2010 Venice Biennale, and which will operate as a participatory research initiative, is to build connections and new creative capacity among diverse communities (local, regional, national and international; place-based and dispersed; physical and virtual-digital) but especially it will connect up two communities on the suburban edge; one affluent and the other deprived.

It is being led by NVA, an arts organisation, but working in collaboration with researchers at Glasgow and Strathclyde Universities. NVA have an impressive track record of major landscape-scaled interventions, championing a non-gallery based, genuinely democratic model of arts presentation, and sensitive environmental intervention, in which NVA stimulates communities into developing their own means of creative expression. It will also involve the academic and professional experts in an inclusive, participatory approach to community involvement. Interestingly, and this goes back to where I started, it will draw upon a wide range of disciplines including environmental writing. Equally important, it serves to demonstrate that a focus on suburbia is not just about the link with the centre or a preoccupation with bounding the city, it is about connecting the periphery and the rest.

Conclusion

As well as forcing a rethink of the economic hierarchy of centre and suburb and demonstrating that creativity and innovation can be suburban, all of the six case-studies illustrate the broader range of skills deemed necessary for a more democratic approach:

design thinking and co-design and other convivial tools like site-based workshops with practitioners and non-practitioners; digital, web-based tools; interdisciplinarity – professionals working with community or amenity groups; co-curation, cultural probes, field trips. You can find skill-sets to this on community planning websites, some much more extensive than this one. The element that is missing is that of Transformation Design, which Cotton and others characterise in six ways: defining and redefining the brief; collaborating between disciplines and non-disciplines; employing participatory design techniques like co-design; building capacity, not dependency, including social capital; designing beyond traditional boundaries; and creating fundamental change with communities who wish to have a new vision. So you have systems thinking coupled with designing for socially progressive ends. While lots of lists like this exist, what needs to be done is to gather these techniques, approaches and methods into a comprehensive toolkit with illuminative example drawn from across the expanded notion of suburbia to offer a very practical way of tackling problems and in the process provide a mechanism for enlarging the public franchise.

In fact, to summarise, six things need to be pulled into this notional toolkit:

1. Multi-disciplinarity and diversity are key to the greater democracy people want – architects, planners and urban designers do not have all the answers.
2. A democratic, human-centred approach needs a broader range of skills to liberate the resourcefulness of people.
3. Re-thinking planning, embracing non-planning – methods that are more developmental and educational; a process of improvisation that takes place over time.
4. New hybrid, joined up theories that are in sync with this recontextualisation.
5. More case-studies, exemplars, educational projects evidenced in the context of the suburbs,
6. A way of visioning the suburbs that bridges the disconnected worlds planning, politics and commerce.

That toolkit could form the basis of Suburbanomics, a place whose geography could accommodate joined-up theories and where, for example, modernism can be a catalyst for transformation instead of a symbol of deprivation; different identities and cultures can be handled simultaneously; the participation of disenfranchised groups is seen as an investment in building social capital; and where promoting the idea that democracy in the public realm is not a referendum or poll but a process that can accommodate dispute, media scrutiny and change.

References

- Borden I. (2006), Thirteen Tactics for the Good Life. In: Ryan Z. (ed.) *The Good Life: New Public Spaces for Recreation*. (97-102). Van Alen Institute and Princeton Architectural Press: New York
- Bruegmann R. (2006), *Sprawl, A Compact History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press

Cowan R. (2005), *The Dictionary of Urbanism*, London, Streetwise Press

Frey H. (1999), *Designing the City: towards a more sustainable urban form*, London, E&FN Spon, pp.75-123

Ford K. (2011), *The Trouble with City Planning, What New Orleans Can Teach Us*, Yale University Press

Foster H. (2011), *The Art-Architecture Complex*, London, Verso

Gallacher P. (2009), *Cultural planning and Social Capital: the non-physical dynamics of place*, Scottish Renaissance Towns Article Series: 02

Harvey D., Contested Cities: Social Process and Spatial Form, pp.225-232, in: Hatherley O. (2010), *The New Ruins of Great Britain*, London, Verso, p.201

Helsinki Design Lab:
http://www.sitra.fi/en/News/achieving_action/achieving_action_reviving_village_20111025.htm. Accessed 23.11.11

Kingston University: <http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/research/suburban-studies/>. Accessed 24.11.11

Landry C. (2000), *The Creative City, A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, London, Comedia

Landry (2006), *The Art of City Making*, London, Earthscan

LeGates R.T. and Stout F. eds. (1996), *The City Reader*, New York, Routledge

Lynch K. (1966), *City Sense and City Design*, MIT Press

Minton A. (2009), *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-first Century City*, pp. 111-114, London, Penguin

Power A. and Houghton J. (2007), *Jigsaw Cities: Big places, Small Spaces (Case Studies on Poverty, Place and Policy)*, Bristol, The Policy Press

Rogerson J. and Rice G. (2009) *Making Sense of Places: "Moral Geographies" of Sensory Urbanism*. *Architectural Theory Review*, 14 (2). pp. 142-155

Sharky C. (2010), *Cognitive Surplus*, London, Penguin, pp.4-8

Sorkin M. (2011), *All Over The Map: Writings on Buildings and Cities*, New York, Verso, pp 287-309.