

JONATHAN BRAY



This is the sound of the suburbs

When we talk about transport policy we are usually talking about cities, but we need to decarbonise transport in the suburbs too

“Child of the First War. Forgotten by the Second. We called you Metro-Land. We laid our schemes. Lured by the lush brochure, down byways beckoned. To build at last the cottage of our dreams, A City clerk turned countryman again. And linked to the Metropolis by train.”

Sir John Betjeman

► It was the train that allowed the escape from the city to suburbs along its linear lines. Then the rise of the car allowed the suburbs to spread everywhere and the cities hollowed out because traditionally, for the British, a city was always a necessary evil. But over time those for whom the ubiquity of the suburban dream was a nightmare started to recolonise cities that in turn came back to life and tried to emulate urban living elsewhere in the world. British cities became fashionable and investable. And then as many of the suburbs started to fray at the edges as their infrastructure aged, the young and the wealthy moved into city centres and the poor moved to the suburbs (most people in poverty now live in suburban areas).

But, arguably, suburbs are now having their moment. Covid confined many people to their homes which became places where they both lived and worked. And even when restrictions were eased or ended, the working from home carried on. And if you are spending more time at home then why wouldn't you want more space... and whilst we are it, a garden would be nice. Interesting too to see the hipsterisation of selected suburbs. Key elements of city living

are there (the cafes and bars) without the need to live in city centres, spiked with innumerable anonymous speculative residential towers, and where you are never far from a bar but always a long way from a place to buy a pint of milk.

Suburbs. Most of us live in them. Most transport policy isn't about them. It's time more of it was. What approaches could we take to achieve this?

The 'trains first, suburbs second' rule that was the original model for suburban development is still true for some cities. Copenhagen's 'finger plan' was developed in 1947 and visualises the city as the palm of a hand with the city developing along the five fingers. Each of the five fingers has its own rail line connecting it to the city. Between each finger are 'wedges' for recreation and agriculture. Later, a sixth finger was added to connect the city to Malmö, over the Öresund Bridge. Residential areas near stations in the core urban areas are built at densities of at least 40 residences per hectare. For the remaining stations, densities of at least 25 residences per hectare are required - which ensures that public transport services are viable.

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I checked out the sixth finger when I was last in Copenhagen which does indeed organise itself along a driverless extension of the city's metro system, with easy access to a nature reserve. You can see similar transit-based approaches for new suburbs in places like IJburg, Amsterdam (which I wrote about in PT202) and Hammarby Sjöstad in Stockholm. With a mass transit system in place these new developments allow for a 'gentle density' of residential homes where common services like refuse, car and bike parking, heating and cooling are collectively organised and, as far as possible, concealed. This leaves more of the streets available for people, including small people. On one residential street in Copenhagen the only car I saw was a pretend plastic one being peddled around by a child.

Meanwhile, in Britain, too many dull 'cow pat', car-dependent housing estates are sprawling all over. Research by Transport for New Homes of over 100 urban and greenfield housing estates of up to 10 years old showed that transport infrastructure investment added road capacity. Bus infrastructure was rarely given significant funding and only one new rail station was delivered.

We do have examples here in the UK of new transit-based suburbs. Most recently the Barking Riverside extension of the London Overground, without which the new mixed development which includes 10,800 homes couldn't have gone ahead. Other relatively recent examples include Kirkstall Forge in West Yorkshire which opened up the development of a former industrial site to support a mixed development that includes over 1,000 homes. And there's Maghull North on the Merseyrail Electrics network which opened in 2018 to serve adjacent housing development of 370 homes. Things get even better when the transport operator is the housing developer. When RATP redeveloped the Montrouge bus station in the south of Paris it rebuilt it as an underground vehicle maintenance facility for 183 vehicles with a new development overhead which included retail units, office space, 660 new flats and a nursery. The development also has green roofs creating 7,300 square metres of rooftop garden. Win-wins are a beautiful thing.

So much for new suburbs, what about the ones we have already built? There's no one



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A Jelbi mobility hub in Berlin



Maghull North, Merseyside



A car dependent housing development in the UK



Kirkstall Forge, West Yorkshire

type of suburb and there’s no magic transport bullet that works for everything from areas of Victorian terraces to neighbourhoods of 1930s semis. Instead it’s more about drawing on a variety of initiatives that could lead to fewer suburban gardens being turned into climate un-resilient hard standing for a jigsaw puzzle of parked cars.

For example, in Berlin, the city has got a grip on what, up until now, what has mostly been nothing more than an increasingly tiresome Powerpoint pitch (Mobility as a Service). They have been installing mobility hubs across the city (suburbs included), complemented by the city’s mobility app ‘Jelbi’. Jelbi allows users to buy public transport tickets as well as access over 40,000 shared vehicles including bikes, cars and e-scooters. Large Jelbi stations are located at S-Bahn and U-Bahn stations and offer hire, return and charging of cars, bikes and scooters and are also stops for taxis and on-demand shuttles. Other policy clubs in the golf bag include those households that can own their own push bikes, e-bikes and e-scooters which, alongside public transport and mobility hubs, start to provide a viable alternative to multiple car ownership and a way of reducing car use.

But let’s not kid ourselves. If the car is

king of trip share in the country as a whole then it is emperor in many suburbs. In these circumstances even a doubling of public transport use isn’t going to make much of a dent. So, we are also going to need to transition to both zero emission cars and to improve the low levels of car occupancy that we have in the UK. Pre-pandemic there were 36 million empty seats travelling during the morning commute every day - an average of just 1.2 occupied seats per car. The average car or van in England is only driven 4% of the time. Large public and private sector employers are probably the easiest place to start in getting serious about lift sharing, car clubs, car pooling and peer-to-peer sharing.

Meanwhile, all those electric vehicles are going to need a power supply whilst the housing stock itself also needs to be decarbonised. There are some opportunities here to look at these twin challenges more holistically - including community microgrids where local generation of energy (from heat pumps, solar and turbines) and management by sophisticated technologies allows you to play tunes with energy generation and storage. This includes powering a household’s electric vehicles and mobility devices (as well as using them as battery storage).

And then there’s climate resilience. Is it any wonder our cities get so hot and flood so easily with all that concrete for roads and hard standing for vehicles?

When we talk about transport policy we are usually talking about cities but if we are serious about decarbonising transport we need to decarbonise transport in the suburbs too. The suburbs were made by transport in the first place and with the right transport policies we can remake them for a world that needs to decarbonise - fast. ■

@ The Good Life: The role of transport in shaping a new and sustainable era for suburbs can be downloaded at: www.urbantransportgroup.org/resources/types/reports/good-life-role-transport-shaping-new-and-sustainable-era-suburbs

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.

