# Global Suburbs

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The Los Angeles *Times* recently covered the opening of a new $60 million gated community of 143 units ranging from $250,000 townhouses to million-dollar "tract mansions" designed by the Orange County, California architect Aram Bassenian. Visitors were treated to McDonald's cheeseburgers as they toured Bassenian's well-practiced synthesis of current up-scale suburban design, including open floor plans, cathedral ceilings and custom kitchens. Advertised as "Pure American," the units sold quickly.[1]

What made this development unusual is that it is located in the suburbs of Beijing, close to the site of the 2008 Summer Olympics. The purchasers were all native Chinese, although many have lived abroad. Beijing developer Zhang Bo had been driving through Irvine, California with an American business associate when he became convinced that prosperous Chinese wanted to live in American-style houses rather than central-city high-rises. He therefore named his development "Orange County."[2]



*Houses, Orange County, Beijing, China.*

Although "Orange County, China" represents an adaptation of the original to the tastes and crowded conditions of Beijing, the emergence of American-style middle-class suburbs at the edge of the megacities of the developing world might well have a profound impact on the structure of these massive and massively-expanding metropolitan agglomerations. From Kung Nam Ku outside of Seoul to Manila's Makati, Kuala Lumpur's Bangsar, Dhaka's Gulshan, Sao Paolo's Alphaville and Lima's Miraflores (to name just a few), these settlements represent a new chapter in the 250-year long history of bourgeois "suburbs of privilege" that first took shape outside London in the mideighteenth century, and then transformed the structure of first the English and eventually North American and Australian cities.

In some ways these "global suburbs" represent a return to the origins of suburbia, when the suburban ideal meant a tightly-restricted environment of privilege that protected its residents from the dual impacts of industrialization and overwhelming immigration from overpopulated rural districts. But London, the megacity of the early nineteenth century, had a million people; Beijing now has 15 million people. Already the 1.5 million automobiles of an exploding middle class are displacing Beijing's famous bicycles.[3] The megacities will no doubt draw on the Western urban experience but are unlikely to duplicate it. More than most sub-disciplines of architecture, the history of urbanism is shaped by what Geoffrey Barraclough has defined as "contemporary history:" work that explicitly takes contemporary issues as the starting-point for identifying historical problems.[4]

Hence the history of urban form over the last fifty years has been concerned above all with the rise, transformation and fate of the Western industrial metropolis. Assuming (perhaps too optimistically) that the Western metropolis has now achieved a measure of definition and stability after decades of "urban crisis," it seems clear that the dominant

problem of twenty-first century urbanism is the megacity of the developing world. These vast agglomerations of 15 million people or more are arguably the climactic phase in what has been the primary narrative of urban history (and world history more broadly) since eighteenth-century Holland and England: the population explosion and movement of population from the agricultural world of the village to the commercial and industrial world of the city. As late as 1900, 86% of the world's population lived in rural areas, and 14% urban. Today, the world's 6 billion people are almost evenly split between rural and urban; but world population is expected to increase by 2 billion over the next thirty years, and almost all of that increase will be in cities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[5]

Gaining some historical perspective on this explosive process is therefore perhaps the primary task of urbanism today. The form of these megacities will be partly the result of their individual histories and cultural context; partly the result of future factors we can hardly guess at (new technologies, ideologies, infectious diseases, etc.); but also partly the result of their building on the forms established by the Western industrial metropolis. Here I will ride two of my favorite hobby-horses: the crucial importance for urban form of what is happening at the periphery; and the importance of the upper-middle-class (the bourgeoisie) as the group with the greatest cultural prestige and range of choices whose characteristic domestic typology eventually dominates the rest of the middle class and hence the metropolis itself.

A recent comparative history of suburbia, Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia, attempted to define two "ideal types" of bourgeois residential areas and their impact on metropolitan form: the Anglo-American peripheral suburb and the Continental city-center.[6] Both derive from middle-class discomfort with the mixed-use, mixed-class central areas which had been the norm for the European middle-class since the Middle Ages. The combination of residence and work within a typical urban rowhouse had served to tie the middle class to the most active, crowded areas of the core. The keynote of the emerging 19th century metropolis was the increasing segregation by class and function, inspired initially by the middle-class desire for a purified domesticity separated from the world of work, a new privacy within districts dominated by members of their own class.

In England and then the United States, this choice tended to work itself out in an exodus from the crowded, expensive areas at the core (which then become "central business districts") toward a "bourgeois utopia" on the cheap but still-accessible land at the edge; a new "marriage of town and country" built around large detached villas in a carefully landscaped setting of similar houses. The upper middle class used their command of transportation to move beyond the pollution and social turmoil of the industrial districts that they themselves were creating; and to use the techniques of private property development to create a privatized realm of stability and services not available in the rest of the metropolis.

By contrast, the Continental (and especially French) model, exemplified by Louis Napoleon's and Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris, is essentially an alliance between a strong, authoritarian state and the urban bourgeoisie. The powers of the state are used to rebuild the urban core as another kind of bourgeois utopia: wide boulevards lined with impressive apartment houses interspersed with the monuments of bourgeois urbanity – the Opera House, the theatre, the department store, restaurants and cafes, etc. The limited resources of the state are lavished on providing services for this core area, which not only attaches the middle class to the state but exemplifies modernity and progress in a generally backward society. Industry and the poor are pushed out to poorly-serviced areas on the periphery where their disturbing presence can be minimized. It is generally forgotten that Paris itself was surrounded by a ring of literal shantytowns as late as the 1950s, and even today the bulk of the Parisian poor (especially the black immigrant poor) found in the banlieues or suburbs.[7]

Of these two ideal types, the Continental model seemed to fit the conditions of the developing world better than the Anglo-American one. Colonial and then authoritarian governments were drawn to using their fragile authority to create impressive core areas in a few centers. These cores in turn provided a limited but intense area of urbanity where a beleaguered middle class could maintain the illusion of participation in the exciting world of metropolitan modernity. With resources focused on the boulevards, apartment houses, and impressive monuments of the core, the vast periphery could be left to massive favelas/shantytowns which constituted the urban reality for the overwhelming majority of

the people, who were as it were "intercepted" by the shantytowns in their flight to the city from the overpopulated rural districts.

It is the thesis of this paper that a different pattern is now emerging in the mega-city, one derived from the Anglo-American rather than the Continental tradition. As even the most authoritarian states are overwhelmed by the task of maintaining services and security at the core of the megacity, the bourgeoisie "opts out" for privatized settlements at the periphery. The logic is perhaps most similar to that of the early industrial cities of the North of England in the first half of the nineteenth-century, where the bourgeoisie escaped the rapidly-deteriorating conditions of the core to settle in gated villa communities like "Victoria Park" in Manchester. There the factory owners and wealthy professionals could buy for themselves the services and security available nowhere else in this first industrial "shock city" and create a green, healthy, well-protected "environment of privilege" at the edge. One difference is that the largest megacities of today are equivalent in size to a hundred nineteenth century Manchesters.

I call these suburbs of privilege at the edge of the megacity "global suburbs" because they reproduce in the megacity the relations of economic and cultural domination that characterize the global economy as a whole. First and most importantly, the residents of these global suburbs are those within their respective societies who benefit most from globalization, and hence are eager to imitate the spatial patterns of privilege in the dominant global society, the United States. Like the ancient Roman villas built at such peripheral sites as North Africa or Britain, the tract mansions of Orange County, China represent the cultural hegemony of the dominant global power.

Secondly, these "global suburbs" are designed, financed, and serviced by a host of global business organizations that have learned the techniques of decentralization in the United States and Europe and are thus well-equipped to bring the goods and services once available only in the core to the periphery. All these settlements are serviced and even defined by large shopping centers – for example, the Glorietta Shopping Mall in Makati, Manila, or the Mid Valley Mega Mall in Bansar, Kuala Lampur – where the enclosed mall's architectural capacity to provide a wholly mangaged and securitized environment is

utilized to its fullest. In addition one finds American-style supermarkets and often American-owned "big box" retailers like Wal-mart operating successfully in the megacities. As the manager of Wal-Mart Brazil put it at the opening of a new distribution center outside Sao Paulo, "We are bringing technology and logistics from Bentonville, Arkansas to Brazil."[8] One is perhaps surprised to learn that there are over 1,000 7-Elevens in Bangkok alone;[9] but in these and other ways the techniques of decentralization are transferred more quickly by multinational corporations than they could have been improvised on the spot.

Crucial to this physical decentralization is the global dominance of the private automobile over public transportation. In cities where all attempts at adequate rail-based rapid transit has faltered in a morass of corruption and inefficiency, even the constantly-congested road system works far better for those who own cars than mass transit. And automobile ownership is exploding precisely in the most congested megacities. Despite the recent travails of the Philippine economy, automobile ownership has doubled in Manila the last decade to 3.5 million vehicles;[10] Beijing now has a relatively modest 1.5 million cars, but automobile production is expected to double in the next five years, reaching the levels of the United States and Japan by 2015 (a new car is becoming the favored dowry for a bride); yet Shanghai is already so congested that officials ration ownership by auctioning license plates with successful bidders now paying over $2,000 for each new car.[11]

The logical result of this growing automobile dependence would be the megacity version of the American Edge City or "technoburb." As more and more of the automobile-owning middle class retreats to American-style suburbs at the edge of development, driving to the historic core become so onerous that "suburban clusters" of residences, offices, and upscale shopping centers provide secure and accessible retreats. The most consistently-privatized example of this is (inevitably) in Communist China, where Hong Kong developer Gordon Wu has built 185 miles of his own toll highways at the still-undeveloped periphery of the rapidlyexpanding Pearl River Delta. The off-ramps from this "Gordon Wu Highway" lead down to rice-paddies (no doubt already owned by Gordon Wu) that will inevitably become crowded and highly-profitable Edge Cities.[12]

More typical, perhaps, is the experience in Sao Paulo, now a metropolitan region of 17 million people notorious for its crowding, crime, and congestion. In a similar pattern to American metropolitan areas, office and retail development followed the migration of the upper middle class from city to suburb. In Sao Paulo this went south from the traditional core to the Avenida Paulista to the Berrini district (now the best established, despite the disadvantages of "extreme traffic congestion, occasional flooding, and poor public transport.") and finally to the "Edge Cities" of Barueri and Alphaville which include office and research parks and distribution centers for multinational corporations. The historic core is far from deserted but commercial rents there average only one-quarter to one-fifth of those in Berrini.[13]

One must acknowledge, however, that these "global suburbs" necessarily co-exist on the periphery with the overwhelming scale of the shanty-town suburbs, and this juxtaposition embodies in physical terms the inequality at the heart of the global economy. Once again one thinks back to the early industrial cities, especially Manchester as depicted in Friedrich Engels' classic work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. Engels had come to Manchester as a young man from the traditional German city of Barmen, and was shocked at the deep class divisions between the working-class districts factory districts and the bourgeois suburbs. One can only imagine his reaction to the favelas and Edge Cities of today. The late English journalist Malcolm Muggeridge observed in the 1960s that, if the eminent dead ever returned to earth, he would like the privilege of showing Karl Marx around the Kremlin and Jesus Christ around the Vatican. I would settle for the privilege of showing Friedrich Engels around "Orange County, China."

Perhaps a more relevant place to visit, however, would be Sao Paulo, perhaps the truest heir to Manchester's industrial prowess among the developing world's megacities. Like nineteenth-century Manchester, Sao Paulo's explosive growth – from one million in 1940 to 17 million today – came from the combined pull of industrial employment and the "push" of rural depopulation. (The Brazilian equivalent of England's enclosure movement was the virtual war against the rural peasantry conducted by the large landowners).[14] The perpetually polluted atmosphere and biologically-dead rivers are common to both places; Sao Paulos's Pinheiros River was recently described as having a putrid stench

and "the color and consistency of Coca-Cola, but without the bubbles,"[15] comparable to Engels's celebrated description of Manchester's River Irk. But even the worst of Manchester's slums, which Engels so carefully recorded, seem almost quaint in their scale compared to Sao Paulo, where by one estimate some 70% of the population is "clandestine" – nearly 12 million people without official access to clean water or sewage facilities. Nevertheless, the region's 17 million people own 4.5 million cars, adding a new layer of pollution and congestion to the mix.[16]



Shantytown, Sao Paulo

For me, a vital difference between Manchester and Sao Paulo is the breakdown of state authority in the latter, especially with regard to law-and-order. As every reader of Dickens knows, the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie was preoccupied with the criminal threat posed by "disorderly classes;" but Bill Sykes and Fagan at their worst can hardly compare with the criminal gangs that dominate especially the Latin America favelas and make the fear of kidnapping for ransom an integral part of the middle class psyche. Although Manchester's "Victoria Park" was indeed a "gated community," its largely symbolic and honorific gates canhardly compare to the pervasive security in Sao Paulo's twenty-first century equivalent, Alphaville, a gated suburb of 30,000 people located 7.5 miles from the core.

Presumably not named for Jean-Luc Goddard's cinematic dystopia, the Sao Paulo Alphaville nevertheless resembles its fictional namesake in elaborate and all-encompassing surveillance techniques, including high walls, hidden cameras and alarm systems, and a force of 1,100 armed security guards patrolling with watchdogs. The Alphaville gym specializes in self-defense and is called "CIA".[17] Developed by the Alphaville Urbanismo Corporation starting in

the 1970s, Alphaville is dedicated to "style and security." Not only does the company provide a reliable infrastructure of paved streets, electricity, water and sewage; but the security makes possible an open suburban style of landscaped lawns, tree-shaded walkways, children's playgrounds (under constant surveillance, of course) and a golf course and other sports facilities.



*Alphaville, Sao Paulo.*

To advertise Alphaville, the company sponsored some episodes of a popular prime-time Brazilian soap opera whose leading male character is an architect. The architect and his mistress visit Alphaville, where, according to Brazil's *Gazeta Mercantil*, "the characters exalt the safety, freedom, and planning of the place, comparing it to the neighborhoods shown in US films. 'It is the dream of many architects to plan an urban center with its own infrastructure and so much green space,'" the architect explains to his mistress – presumably before they turn to concerns more typical of a soap opera.[19]

The security costs for Alphaville and other Brazilian gated communities – there are estimated to be 300 in all – approach 20% of the total infrastructure and maintenance expenditure, but it is one the residents gladly pay. The current murder rate in Sao Paulo is 60 per 100,000 people compared to 7.8 in New York City. Indeed, the richest occupants of Alphaville's tract mansions and high-rise condominums have private helicopters to fly them from one of the suburb's 3 helipads quickly and securely over Sao Paulos's favelas and congested highways to offices in the Berrini district and elsewhere.[20] Alphaville Urbanismo is now building four similar large-scale projects in Brazil and three in Portugal.

Although the Anglo-American suburb was created to enshrine exclusion and inequality, it proved (in my reading) to be perhaps even more powerful as

a mechanism of inclusion as the middle-class and much of the working class were able in the twenti-eth-century to attain their humbler versions of "the suburban dream house." In the far harsher context of the twenty-first century megacity, the ultimate meaning of Alphaville and the other global "suburbs of privilege" remains to be seen.

## ENDNOTES

[1] The problem of "global suburbs" was first suggested to me by international students who responded to my work on Anglo-American suburbs with questions and examples drawn from their own experiences. I wish to acknowledge specifically the contribution of Didem Ekici, Ph.D. student in architecture, whose research on the suburbs of Istanbul was particularly important in helping me to formulate this topic.

[2] *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2002, A1

[3] *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2002, A1

[4] Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 1964).

[5] *New York Times*, August 20, 2002, F8

[6] Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

[7] Peter Hall, *The World Cities* (New York: McGraw-Hill), Chap. 3

[8] *Gazeta Mercantil Online*, July 16, 2001

[9] *Bangkok Post Online*, March 9, 2002.

[10] *Straits Times Online*, Sept. 18. 2002

[11] *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2002, A1.

[12] Rem Koolhaas et. al., Mutations (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000), "Pearl River Delta." Wu himself recently claimed that his toll roads were already yielding $250 million per year. *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2002, A1

[13] *Gazeta Mercantil Online*, June 6, 1997

[14] *The Guardian (London)*, June 26, 2002, 8

[15] *Financial Times(London)*, August 1, 2001, 10.

[16] *Christian Science Monitor*, December 11, 1991

[17] *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1999, A1

[18] *Gazeta Mercantil Online*, December 23, 1998

[19] *Gazeta Mercantil Online*, March 18, 1998

[20] *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2002, A1