

# URBAN/RURAL HYBRIDS: THE URBANISATION OF FORMER SUBURBS (URFSURBS)

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**ABSTRACT:** In pace with changing social developments, cities undergo regular processes of transformation. Thus, following a temporary preference for suburban living, the inner city has for some years now been enjoying a residential renaissance. A further, as yet little noticed, trend is the urbanisation of former suburbs. Encompassing urbanisation and gentrification processes found in the inner-ring suburbs, this entails a breaking of established dichotomies and the development of hybrid phenomena that can be encapsulated in the acronym URFSURBS: ‘urbanisation of former suburbs’. Focusing on examples from Southern California and Greater Paris, this article places these developments in context and outlines their implications for future research.

**KEY WORDS:** suburbia, urbanisation, hybridisation, urban/rural hybrids, URFSURBS

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## Introduction

In pace with changing social developments, cities have always undergone regular changes in settlement structures and socio-spatial relationships, and hence too in their material and structural requirements. Both in the USA and in Europe, processes of this kind have accelerated since the end of the Second World War, becoming increasingly clear in the later 20th and early 21st centuries.

The advent of mass motorisation immediately after the Second World War, and the dream of ‘a place of one’s own in the country’, brought with it a temporary predilection for suburban living, removed from the noise and bustle of the city and its problem areas, whether in the downgraded

inner city or on its soulless new estates (see e.g. Dikeç 2007; Donzelot 2004; Kühne 2012a; Palen 1995; Weber 2013). Increasingly since the 1980s, however, a counter-trend can be observed in the form of re-urbanisation and gentrification of inner-city residential areas, and a parallel decline has recently become apparent in older inner-ring suburbs (e.g. Atkinson, Bridge 2004; Blasius 2008; Helbrecht 1996; Helbrecht, Dirksmeier 2011; Hesse 2008, 2010; Palen 1984). Yet this is not universal: examples from the USA, France and eastern Europe (Kühne 2016; Kühne et al. 2017) indicate counter-processes of urbanisation, gentrification and hybridisation that create a new type of urban area in suburbia: the *urbanised former suburbs* we call *URFSURBS*. These constitutive elements of the postmodern urban/ rural

hybrids (Kühne 2012a) have as yet received little attention from researchers.

Placing these developments in the context of urban research, the present article focuses on recent key changes, illustrated with URSURBS in San Diego (Southern California – SoCal) and Greater Paris, and examines the patterns they evince and how they might be typified. The conclusion considers perspectives for future research.

## Development trends and research areas

Suburbanisation was for a while a predominant theme in both US and European urban research (see e.g. Donzelot 2004; Hayden 2004; Masotti, Hadden 1974; ARL 1975; Brake et al. 2001b; Burdack, Hesse 2006; Priebs 2004). Suburbs offered an aesthetic stylisation of rural living – e.g. in the idea of a well-kept garden – without its disadvantages (Hardinghaus 2004; Kazig 2016; Kühne 2012a; Palen 1995). They were, therefore, the preferred location for families: “The suburban home, not the city apartment, was touted as the place where small children would find a ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ environment” (Palen 1995: 158–159). In pursuit of aesthetic purity, anything that ran counter to stereotypical concepts of beauty, from power stations and goods warehouses to graffiti, was desensualised (Kühne 2013a). And with suburbanisation came an increase in social segregation that left anyone behind who had little symbolic capital in Bourdieu’s sense (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). The ‘dispossessed’ remained in the inner city (Häußermann, Siebel 2004), or later in the inner suburbs like Watts or Torrance in Los Angeles, or on the increasingly stigmatised new estates (Glasze et al. 2012; Glasze, Weber 2014; see also Dikeç 2007; Weber 2016a, 2016b; Weber, Kühne 2016).

When the suburbanisation wave subsided, urban research began to concentrate on counter-movements like the re-urbanisation and gentrification of the inner city (Blasius 2008; see also Blasius, Dangschat 1990; Füller, Marquardt 2010; Gebhardt, Wiegandt 2014; Helbrecht 1996; Helbrecht, Dirksmeier 2011; Marquardt, Füller 2012; Wiegandt 2014), or on specific smaller residential areas that were growing in profile and importance (for Germany see e.g. Schnur 2005,

2008; Weber 2013). The transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, together with the increasing postmodernisation of society, reinforced these phenomena (Kühne 2006, 2012a) and brought with them the juxtaposition of disparate social milieux that is a typical feature of postmodern city development. Urban space is no longer a unique, coherent entity (Hall 2006; Jorgensen, Tylecote 2007), as can be clearly seen in the ‘edge cities’ of North America. Built in the heyday of postmodern urban development, they concentrate traditionally central functions outside the traditional city centre. They lack the autonomous legal status of the established city, but offer highly comparable residential and work opportunities, as well as shopping and leisure facilities (Garreau 1992; Kühne, Schönwald 2015). They represent an entirely new type of settlement, quite different from the suburb – “not sub-anything”, as Garreau put it (1992: 29). An even newer phenomenon is the so-called ‘edgeless city’ (Lang 2003) which, in contrast to the edge city, does not form an agglomeration, but arises from corporate structures set along main traffic routes (Kühne 2013b: 102; Kühne 2015). Its sheer size and lack of definite borders makes the edgeless city hard to identify from the outside (Lang et al. 2013: 732), and such constructs resist any attempt to describe them in modern dichotomous functional or aesthetic categories.

A common feature of these recent patterns of settlement is fragmentation typical of postmodern spaces, where the absence of clear external markers of identification is complemented by inner fissures resulting from spatial patchworks (Kühne 2012a). Patchworks of this kind “do not imply the absence of differentiation but rather *presuppose a differentiation* that gives rise to hybrid crossings, recombinations and reintegration” (Vester 1993: 29, original emphasis; and see Hoesterey 2001). New mixed forms and new fragmentations arise here that make precise spatial classifications like urban/ rural difficult or impossible to maintain. In this sense postmodernity is typically hybrid – a term used in the social sciences for “a strategy of negotiating and mixing differences” (Hein 2006: 55), in which the differences are not homogenised but remain clearly evident (Zapf 2002: 55–56). Wherever diverse socio-cultural contexts interact and this interaction is spatially expressed, pluralism – even

contradictory pluralism – replaces univocality and homogeneity, creating the type of network that has become a typical aspect of modernity (Kühne, Schönwald 2015: 27–28). Received polarities such as that between culture and nature (see Kühne 2012b) tend to dissolve; others become more starkly apparent. This line of thought has been developed by Sieverts (2001, 2003) with the concept of the ‘Zwischenstadt’ (‘in-between city’), as well as by Kühne (2012a) in his concept of the ‘urban/ rural hybrids’, as for example in Los Angeles (for which see also Kropp 2015; Schönwald 2017; Weber 2016a, 2017). Following Dahrendorf (2007), urban/ rural hybrids can be understood as a result of individual striving for self-realisation, both physical and symbolic.

The term ‘urban/ rural hybrid’ (Kühne 2012a, 2016; Kühne, Schönwald 2015; Weber 2016a) invites a socio-constructivist approach to the city/ country relation that is based not on a dichotomy but on considerations that are structural (levels of building), functional (levels of centrality), and lifestyle (urban/ suburban/ rural mix), as well as emotional (a sense of belonging) and cognitive (especially in settlement research). In this respect, Los Angeles is often seen as the prototype of the postmodern city, evincing *par excellence* the trends in spatial development described above, especially the fragmented, patchwork quality (Hall 2006; Kühne 2012a; Laux, Thieme 2008; Soja, Scott 1998). This has also aesthetic connotations, for such patchworks defy the simple aesthetic dichotomies of urban/rural, nature/culture or beautiful/ugly, typical of modernism (Kühne 2012a, 2012b; Schönwald 2015). They require a ‘hybrid aesthetic’ that is sympathetic not so much to ‘purity’ but to the mixed and contradictory, the crude and disharmonious (Fayet 2003; Hartz, Kühne 2009). Far from rejecting the historical in the manner of the 1960s as obsolete and inferior – or indeed often as ‘kitsch’ (Illing 2006) – such a perspective will see it as valuable and worth preservation and architectural development (see also Liessmann 2002).

Suburbanisation can be seen as a prior phase (or starting point) of urban/rural hybridisation, especially if one takes into consideration its accelerating complexity and fragmentation (above all in the USA) in recent decades and years. Here, too, the trend away from socio-culturally homogeneous neighbourhoods and classical family

structures, along with a rediscovery of the advantages of urban living, has become apparent. The predilection for lofts and other denser forms of living space on the one hand and the advent of such phenomena as urban gardening (see e.g. Müller 2011; Nettle 2016) on the other also contributes to the subversion of received urban/ rural dichotomies.

A final aspect that has received little attention to date – the ‘urbanisation’ of suburbs was a phenomenon of only limited interest (Burdack, Hesse 2006: 388; Frey 2003; Masotti, Hadden 1973) – is the process of structural, socio-economic and symbolic-spatial transformation observable globally in various metropolitan areas. Culminating in urbanisation and gentrification, this also incorporates tendencies towards (urban/ rural) hybridisation that go hand in hand with the growing autonomy of smaller suburban units (Brake et al. 2001a: 273; Müller, Rohr-Zänker 2001: 27) and the “decline [...] of other ‘inner-ring suburbs’” (Hesse 2008: 229).

## URFSURBS – urbanisation of former suburbs

The relation between urban restructuring, socio-demographic change and the recent growth of fragmented, hybrid and/or patchwork socio-spatial arrangements in former suburban areas – the process we have called ‘the urbanisation of former suburbs, or URFSURBS’ – calls for a closer description and analysis than it has hitherto received (Kühne 2016; Kühne, Schönwald 2015; Kühne et al. 2017). URFSURBS are embedded in patchwork structures (Kühne 2012a) in which the functional segmentation preferred by modern urban planners (Allmendinger 2000) has been gradually replaced by the mixing of functions and multiple changes in the way spaces are used (Kühne 2012b). While this shift in settlement patterns has been noticed in a cursory manner (see e.g. Müller, Rohr-Zänker 2001: 27–28), it has not been a subject of concentrated research yet.

Our investigation into the URFSURB phenomenon begins in Southern California, with San Diego and to a lesser extent Los Angeles, and a comparison will then be drawn with settlement patterns in Greater Paris (Kühne et al. 2017). The qualitative results are based both on biographical

and ero-epic (free dialogue) interviews, and on observed traces of physical settlement behaviour such as streets and buildings (Kühne 2016; Kühne, Schönwald 2015; Kühne et al. 2017).

## URFSURBS in San Diego

Regarded ever since the advent of the streetcar as the embodiment of the 'desirable residential location', suburbia have in the new millennium increasingly given way to a more *urban lifestyle* (Hanlon 2012; and see e.g. Hesse 2008). This is also a result of demographic change. The number of US households with children keeps dropping, from about 50% in 1960 to a forecast of 25% in 2025 (Gallagher 2013: 19). And the number of single-person households is on the increase. These changes have been accompanied by a noticeable decline in the number of young Americans holding a driving licence: in 1980 the figure was 66%

of 17 year-olds, in 2010 only 47% (Gallagher 2013: 20). This is significant because in suburbia, where public transportation is scarce, a driving licence is a basic requisite, whereas in the city, where parking space is at a premium, ownership of a car is not only unnecessary, it can even hinder mobility. Nor is mobility quite so necessary for work, given the universal availability of modern ICT: with a table and chair and wireless Internet many people can work pretty much anywhere. The observation of major building projects, such as shopping malls, also indicates a shift away from suburbia – up to now the typical site for malls – towards the inner city (Füller, Marquardt 2010; Gallagher 2013; Kühne, Schönwald 2015).

The growing preference for urban living is reflected in the incidence of new urban settlement types in traditionally suburban areas. Thus the URFSURBS of San Diego (Kühne, Schönwald 2015) occupy first generation suburban space originally settled in the early 20th century. These



Fig. 1. URFSURB in North Park, San Diego, where apartment blocks increasingly intrude into classical single-family-home districts (photo: Olaf Kühne 2016).

settlements, which have arisen irrespective of earlier downtown regeneration, have typical inner-city characteristics such as apartment blocks with retail and food outlets to former suburban space, and the urban consumer preferences of their new residents foster the opening of alternative shops and restaurants in hitherto vacant or differently used premises (Kühne, Schönwald 2015; see Fig. 1). At the same time suburban shopping malls and their lessees, faced with a shortfall in their hitherto solvent customers, are confronted with economic problems that may even lead to closure (Gallagher 2013: 180). The URFSURBS of San Diego also reveal a change in the population structure from traditional families with suburban life and consumption patterns (the latter above all in shopping malls) to an increase in single persons and pairs whose lifestyle and preferences are markedly urban. The development of URFSURBS is thus rooted in shifting patterns of settlement that also have a number

of other effects, varying from a visible decline in the inner-ring suburbs to a diminishing attractiveness of the suburban periphery (Hesse 2008, 2010). This, in turn, results in the migration of people with little symbolic capital to outer rings – as, for example, in Garden Grove, a suburb in Orange County originally built for the white middle class, which is now, after the departure of that group, being settled largely by Hispanic immigrants.

San Diego's former suburb of Hillcrest in the north of the city is a prime example of an URFSURB. Driven, like West Hollywood, by a gay community, Hillcrest has undergone increasing urbanisation, gentrification and hybridisation that has set it off as an independent entity from downtown San Diego – a fact expressed in the appearance of the name 'Hillcrest' on street signage. Retail outlets in the centre of the district are now the equivalent of those in a classical mid-size European town.



Fig. 2. Alternative fashion and applied-art shops keep appearing on the border of Burlingame and South Park (photo: Olaf Kühne 2016).

Another example of an URFSURB is South Park, in north-east downtown San Diego (Fig. 2), especially where it borders on Burlingame, a district known for its alternative lifestyle and retail outlets. South Park was originally a 'typical streetcar suburb' (Palen 1995: 38), a homogeneous middle-class settlement based economically on land speculation. Situated at a distance from the workplaces of its residents, it had a significantly higher building – and social networking – density than the 'automobile suburbs' (Palen 1995: 44) of later decades. The predominance of small houses – in contrast to modern estates designed for the same social group – and the proximity to downtown San Diego and Balboa Park made South Park attractive to single persons and childless couples who wanted a synthesis of suburban comfort and urban opportunities (Gallagher 2013; Kühne, Schönwald 2015). The small-town, somewhat 'alternative' flair of South Park is especially notable in the centre it shares with Burlingame, where small owner-managed shops and cafés occupy historically interesting premises – with a corresponding rise in real-estate prices.

## URFSURBS in Greater Paris

Rampant suburbanisation and urban sprawl, edge cities and edgeless cities mark the USA as a spatial context so different from Europe that direct comparisons are difficult. Reasons for this can be found, for instance, in the greater impact of economic logic in the USA than in (western) Europe (Kühne 2012a; Marcuse, van Kempen 1999), in the long history of many European cities compared with the planned cities of the USA (Blum 1994), and in different social value systems. Nevertheless, there are some striking parallels between the URFSURBS of Southern California and those, for example, of Greater Paris (Kühne et al. 2017; for the growing impact of the Parisian periphery in general see also Bontje, Burdack 2005; Phelps, Parsons 2003).

The industrial revolution in France, especially after 1840, led to an ever-increasing polarisation of the city and its surrounding regions. The so-called *banlieues* constituted an independent urban periphery infused with negative social, emotional, aesthetic and symbolic connotations (Weber

2016b: 23–24; see also Dikeç 2007; Vieillard-Baron 1996). Here, those who could no longer afford to live in the inner city dwelt cheek by jowl with workers from dense estates – sometimes no more than unplanned hutments – built next to the factories where they worked (Paulet 2004; and see e.g. Soullignac 1993).

After the Second World War several trends can be observed. A massive housing shortage was met with equally massive residential building projects, the *grands ensembles* that characterise the margins of almost all French cities of any size and that both architectonically and infrastructurally have fallen for the most part behind the expectations made of them and are, therefore, increasingly stigmatised (Glasze et al. 2012; Glasze, Weber 2014; Weber 2013). From about the 1960s they were accompanied by other major construction projects typified by the modern skyscrapers of La Défense, the business quarter to the west of downtown Paris. At the same time, and continuing into the 1970s, suburbanisation processes saw the spread of single-family housing to the *banlieues* – the *zones pavillonnaires* caricatured in the phrase *l'entre-soi protecteur*: 'our own safe haven' (Donzelot 2004: 26). Infused (again) with the idyll of aesthetic purity, these new residential structures appealed to a middle class that could afford to live there and who shunned the as yet unrenovated accommodation of the inner city as much as they did the mass housing of the *grands ensembles*.

These developments gave rise to a patchwork of industry intermingled with single-family-home areas, (partly) stigmatised mass housing, shopping centres, and business hubs connected, but also separated, by traffic arteries. In this sense Greater Paris (the city with its three neighbouring *départments*, see Vieillard-Baron 1996: 81), with its approx. 6.5 million inhabitants, reveals the mixtures, contradictions and disharmonies of an urban/ rural hybrid (Weber 2016a; and see in general Fayet 2003; Hartz, Kühne 2009). During the 1990s a renaissance in urban living brought gentrification processes to the inner city, again driving lower-income groups out to the *banlieues*, or even further afield to the outer edge of the agglomeration (Boyer 2000; Castro 2007; Donzelot 2004).

This is where the development of URFSURBS comes in: as in San Diego, so too in Paris, life in

a single-family suburban home is no longer the only conceivable goal for many people – not least because it means wearisome commuting by train or car. But real-estate prices in inner-city *arrondissements* are forbiddingly high, allowing at best only very small apartments (Chambre des notaires de Paris 2015; Weber 2016b: 31). In those circumstances middle-income groups upwards have started to discover quarters immediately adjacent to the inner city in the ‘banlieue’ *départements*. A case in point, already cited by Marchal, Stébé and Bertier (2016) in the context of gentrification, is Levallois-Perret in the north-west of Greater Paris. At the beginning of the 19th century the area now known by this name was partly used for agriculture; then, in the course of industrialisation, it became an overcrowded industrial and working-class town known above all for its Citroën factory and its deprived quarters like *les Passages* (Faure 1991; Marchal, Stébé 2012). The wave of de-industrialisation in the 1970s saw many factories moving away, and the rising real-estate prices against the background of tertiarisation have forced smaller “automobile and other workshops, factories and warehouses [...] to

migrate to the *grande banlieue*, even further from the centre of Paris” (Marchal et al. 2016: 100). Today Levallois-Perret is France’s most densely populated *commune*, a place of “plate-glass towers and high-tech buildings [...] housing major international firms” (Marchal et al. 2016: 101). It is caught up in a process of urbanisation and gentrification where, in the new *Front de Seine* development (Fig. 3), service industries, postmodern residential buildings and urban flair occupy land that was once the home of Citroën assembly line workers.

A major force for change in the residential housing profile of Levallois-Perret has been the *commune*, which indicates the importance of municipal politics in urban planning. Older buildings from the industrial era have been swept away in favour of higher and more comfortable apartment blocks with balconies or terraces for so-called ‘*bobos*’ (‘*bourgeois bohèmes*’: see Marchal, Stébé 2012) who, at around 7,500 euro/m<sup>2</sup>, pay prices almost as high as in Paris itself, where housing costs on average 7,900 euro/m<sup>2</sup> (Chambre des Notaires de Paris 2015; Weber 2016b: 31). Unlike the *grands ensembles* or single-family-home neighbourhoods



Fig. 3. Postmodern blocks where Citroën factory buildings once stood (photo: Florian Weber 2016).

of the *banlieues*, which serve primarily as dormitories, the URFSURBS have generated an infrastructure and lifestyle of their own: “It is really very easy for the better off, the *bobos*, to spend Saturday mornings in the popular boutiques (Bérénice, The Kooples, Sandro, IKKS, Gérard Darel) and Sundays browsing market stalls for vegetables, health food, cheese and wine under the watchful eye of the video cameras set up at every corner by a well-equipped and armed police force” (Marchal et al. 2016: 103; Fig. 4).

The overall picture is arguably an expression of a postmodern aesthetic in which hybrid and – from a modern perspective – contradictory, even incompatible elements combine to demonstrate a new and conspicuous construct of identity.

In Levallois-Perret a former industrial and working-class area has become a flourishing urban municipality attracting so-called ‘yuppies’ and ‘dinkies’ with accommodation tailored to their tastes and expectations, and a lifestyle offer including cafés, boutiques and parking facilities. At the same time this affords in some areas a mixing, in others a juxtaposition, of different social milieux, or in yet other cases a displacement of

lower-income groups in favour of better-earning households. Here, too, an increasing fragmentation can be observed (see also Weber, Kühne 2016).

Levallois-Perret is not alone in this respect. Marchal et al. (2016: 96) observe similar processes at work in other *communes* such as La Garenne-Colombes and Asnières in the north-west, and more recently also in the north-east of the French capital, for example in Montreuil, Pantin, Aubervilliers, or Saint-Ouen. Collet (2008) suggests that the ratio of managers and university employees to the overall population in Bas-Montreuil, a residential area of Montreuil towards the eastern edge of Paris, had already increased significantly in the 1990s, and that the process of gentrification has accelerated there since the turn of the millennium. On both sides of the *Rue de Paris*, with its multicultural retailers, “rental blocks stand alongside workers’ flats and small industrial premises, many of which have been converted into more or less comfortable lofts” (Collet 2008: paragraph 10). The contrasts and contradictions of this patchwork of renovated and unrenovated buildings, restaurants and



Fig. 4. Life as an orderly idyll: Levallois-Perret (photo: Florian Weber 2016).



cafés, new blocks and graffiti, the sheer multiplicity of structures makes for a hybrid aesthetic even more pronounced than that of Levallois-Perret. And similar processes can be observed at Ivry-sur-Seine in the south-east of Paris, where urban-planning measures coupled with gentrification also attract new middle-class residents. Here, good *métro* connections – another essential component of urban living (Couratier et al. 2006: 68) – have brought a visible concentration of upper- and middle-income groups to the Petit Ivry quarter, which borders on the capital. All of these municipalities seem, then, to be undergoing processes we have typified as URFSURBS. So far, however, the complexity of the underlying processes has hindered an extensive investigation of the phenomenon.

### Typological development and further research

The examples cited above from San Diego and Greater Paris indicate the desirability of further investigation within the framework of urban geography, and with a social-constructivist research focus that facilitates the elucidation of contrasts and dissonances (Kühne 2006, 2008, 2013b; Kühne et al. 2013; Weber 2015). Preliminary analysis suggests the existence of a spectrum of URFSURBS that could be classified according to grade and type. In San Diego's Barrio Logan, for example, the existing physical structures (especially buildings) have been largely preserved by their new residents, so that one might speak of *marginal* URFSURBS in the wake of urban migration. In South Park/ Burlingame, on the other hand, it is more a case of individual modification and renovation of the existing physical structures by new and better-off residents, and of a concomitant change in use patterns – in other words, *individualised* URFSURBS. And in Hillcrest, where the impact on the existing physical substance (again especially buildings) has been more radical (with single-family homes demolished to make way for apartment blocks), the patchwork, hybrid aesthetic of contrasts between big and small, new and old suggests the term *modifying* URFSURBS. Finally, Levallois-Perret exemplifies a residential quarter whose prior physical structures have been replaced wholesale by new ones that have

brought with them corresponding changes in use – a case of *restructured* URFSURBS.

These various forms, it may be argued, entail different degrees (or intensities) of change not just in physical and material substance, but also in the lifestyle and values. As a research area, this is largely new territory, and the rapidly developing dynamics of its object demands a clear and at the same time sensitive typological focus. This applies in equal measure to demographic structures – taking account, among other things, of the motives of incoming groups – if changes not only in the physical profile but also in social trends and interdependencies are to be accurately traced. An intensive parallel investigation of different locations with different urban development histories and regional specificities would shed more light on the phenomenon of URFSURBS and make a valuable contribution to current discussions in the field of urban geography.

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