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Suburbs: the next slum? Explorations into the contested terrain of social construction and political discourse

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"The subprime crisis is just the tip of the iceberg. Fundamental changes in American life may turn today's McMansions into tomorrow's tenements."
Christopher B. Leinberger, The Atlantic, March 2008
"America's suburbs are coming to resemble its city centres. That is both good news and bad."
The Economist, 29 May 2008

Introduction

1   The emergence of suburbia – the developed area situated in-between the urban and the rural – represents a significant component of the more recent history of European as well as North American cities. It is characterised by blurring boundaries between town and country and represents an increasingly diversified pattern of urban and semi-urban spaces in terms of built environment, daily life, social structure etc. However, suburbanisation and the resulting spatial formations have always come under critical scrutiny by urban planners and researchers. They were held responsible for making cities monotonous, space-consuming and congested, also for reinforcing paternalistic lifestyles and family relations. In the course of demographic transformations, structural economic change toward services and the rising demand for urban amenities, a new perspective on suburbs has emerged: Suburbanisation no longer contributes to the demise of the European city, but suburbs themselves are becoming subject of decline and despair. Rising energy costs may even destroy the historical logic on upon which suburban areas have been built: cheap gasoline and massive transport infrastructure that have helped urbanise the periphery.

2   As a consequence, it was argued that suburbs may represent the "next slum" (Leinberger, 2008), since the model of living in sub- and ex-urban "MacMansions" is no longer considered sustainable living or housing, in both economic and environmental terms. Urban studies has also concluded that suburbs might be "running out of staff", due to a substantial change in lifestyle and gender issues that have triggered the popular assumption that the lifestyle model of the "desperate housewives" would soon be vanishing (Häussermann et al., 2008: 370). This swan-song of the suburbs has several shortcomings: first, it represents an image of the suburbs that is way too simplistic (if not paternalistic), since daily life and social change in suburban areas are clearly much more complex than this attitude suggests. Second, it remains to be seen how suburban development will continue in the mid future, given the historical cycle of ups and downs in the course of urbanisation that are far from novel and might be assessed more carefully. Third, regarding the highly popular comparison of European and North American urban development, one has to be cautious against oversimplification and practices of generalisation that do not take into account the specific circumstances and trajectories of different cases.

3   It is argued that the temporary slow-down of suburban development mirrors the manifold representation of the contemporary city, as does the current shift of public attention toward inner cities. This paper reflects on this most recent turn in urban discourse and looks behind its rationale and meanings focusing on the experiences of Germany and North America. The paper aims at reconstructing the way suburbs and suburbanisation are perceived and discursively

framed. It compiles predominant arguments used in the professional anti-suburban discourse using discourse analysis and based on a critical assessment in light of material processes.

Discourse analysis as a theory and methodology

4   The paper pursues the methodological perspective of the "discourse analysis" in an urban, particularly sub-urban context (Hesse, 2008a). Following this particular view, typical patterns of discourse in the context of suburbanisation shall be identified. There are several reasons for choosing such approach: First, any matter that is subject to scientific inquiry is also fundamentally constructed, is socially, culturally and linguistically determined. This dimension is important, beyond its material sense and conditions. Second, it is undisputed that discourse develops dynamically, impacts the way the subject is dealt with and is thus becoming relevant for politics and policy. Third, the terms and the modes of discourse also determine the social perception of space and related problems (see for further insight into this approach Keller et al., 2001).

5   Such analysis draws on the more recent tradition of constructivist research approaches that had received increasing attention over the last decades in cultural studies and social sciences. They emerged from an intention to reconstruct and better understand societal conditions in the course of socio-economic change (see Bachmann-Medick, 2006). The linguistic, cultural and, last but not least, spatially situated *turn* from a rather material, objectivistic perspective towards a more interpretative, subjectivist view of the world entails a broad, almost unlimited variety of research approaches. These approaches may have their roots in different streams of theories and understandings of science, particularly in structuralism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism or in the hermeneutic tradition (Berndt and Pütz, 2007). Their possibly common frame is that they are no longer dominated by one "correct" or "true" approach to the subject of research, but allow for developing related perspectives in quite different ways. This seems to be particularly the case once exploring the role of cities and "space" as subject of constructivist analysis and discursive practices (cf. Philo, 1991; Lossau and Lippuner, 2004). "*Spaces, then, may be constructed in different ways by different people, through power struggles and conflicts of interest. This idea that spaces are socially constructed, and that many spaces may co-exist within the same physical space is an important one. It suggests the need to analyse how discourses and strategies of inclusion and exclusion are connected with particular spaces*" according to Flyvbjerg and Richardson (2002: 56).

6   This paper takes an interpretative, hermeneutic perspective towards the broad range of possible frameworks and theories that are offered by constructivist approaches. It focuses on the practice of discourse analysis, which is discussed against the background of material developments. According to Matissek and Reuber (2004), this understanding of discourse aims at reconstructing action (*Handlung*) which is conducted as a kind of linguistic game. Thus discourse, as a classic definition by Foucault (1973) had once put it, includes the "*entirety of rules that are immanent to a certain practice*" (cit. after Matissek and Reuber, 2004: 227). Discourse is analysed in order to identify structural, determining patterns of societal practice – beyond individual modes of perception and articulation. Actors involved tend to follow commonly accepted rules that determine what will be allowed to express (and what not). Of course, playing with such rules also means to invoke the power of interpretation, and this is extremely important for material processes, since in many cases it is evident that practice follows discourse (cf. Bauriedl, 2007 in the case of Hamburg, also Schmitt, 2007 on the metropolitanisation of the Ruhr area).

7   However, discourse is not necessarily or primarily confined to the analysis of communicative patterns as part of societal interaction, as it was developed e.g. by Hajer's (1997) "environmental discourse". Rather, discourse analysis goes beyond, pointing at structural patterns within which language, the assignation of significance and material development

tend to converge. Based on a critical text analysis, discourses can be considered as solidified forms of societal (public) communication, which are embedded in each specific contexts, rationale and interests. Such a perspective is particularly important for spatial thinking that was for long occupied by essentialist concepts of space, the most prominent figure being the so-called "container space" (cf. Miggelbrink, 2002). This physical-material space had traditionally been used for explaining the interplay of structure and agency. This applies especially to critical writings on suburbia (see below). This essentialist understanding of space has been preceded by more pluralistic terms, with spatial relations, individual perception and particularly representation playing a central role. The shift towards relational thinking had been justified with particular reference to the issue of action-theory (see Werlen, 1997).

8   More recently human geography and planning have opened their mind against constructivist understandings of space (Blotevogel, 2003). In contrast, early contributions to the interpretative paradigm in spatial contexts mainly emerged from the social sciences (Bourdieu, 1985; Giddens 1995). Whereas these neighbour disciplines particularly emphasise the phenomenon of a *spatial turn* and a related reassertion of space, representatives of geography are somehow sceptical of a quick 'spatialisation' of issues that might not be explained in core spatial terms (Lossau and Lippuner, 2004). Statements emphasising an apparent "return of space" (Schlögel, 2003: 19) have to be taken quite cautiously. Nevertheless, constructivist approaches allow for an extended point of view compared to traditional analyses and thus offer new theoretical insights of the subject. According to Matissek and Reuber (2004: 227): "*It is about language and our everyday experience that make space 'living', provide with associations, establish connections between us and particular places*" (our translation). With respect to planning sciences, discourse analysis connects with research on *leitbilder* – given the distinction that at this point the issue is not about identifying a "right" way for the future, but unfolding concurring opinions on the urban development of past and present.

9   Discourses can be considered as means to convey knowledge and to structure communication. They are normally based on an existing knowledge stock and connect different forms of linguistic performance and attribution of significance in past, present and future. The temporal sequences of discourses, their particular bifurcations and also related offsets, which had been coined "orderless buzz" by Foucault, can be analysed systematically and thus reconstructed in a "stream of knowledge", according to Jäger (2005). He distinguished certain levels or strands of discourse (Jäger, 2001: 97) entailing different meanings. "Inter-" or "Metadiscourses" bundle forms of knowledge that circulate in a broader public and also related forms of linguistic or even symbolic communication about it. "Special discourses" are being generated in specialised, epistemic communities (e.g. in science, planning practice, business) and convey distinct contents or patterns of interpretation. "Contra discourses" evolve in concurrence or as delineation to existing discourses. They are often dedicated to bring alternative patterns of interpretation to attention (Schmitt, 2007: 32). All such cases have in common that discourses tend to specifically form those subjects they are 'talking' about.

10   This perspective is used in order to analyse particular prescriptions that are being applied to subjects like "city" or "suburb" and will be investigated further in the case of three streams of discourse: the discourses on suburbanisation, *Zwischenstadt* and the most recent turn towards suburban decline (see Table 1). As a methodological background to discuss (sub-) urban perceptions, particular reference is being made to the work of Beauregard (1993) who had convincingly emphasised discursive frames regarding urban decline in the American Midwest in his book *Voices of Decline*. The particular role of the suburbs in urban discourses has been emphasised as yet by only a few contributions (with respect to the European City, see Hesse and Kaltenbrunner, 2005; regarding the North American suburb, see Bruegman 2005; Beauregard, 2006 and particularly Nicolaides, 2006).

Table 1: Concurring discourses on "Suburbia"

Special discourse	*Suburbanisation*	Zwischenstadt	*Suburbia – the next slum?*
Main subject	Expansion of the city beyond administrative, functional, morphological borders	Emergence of new urban forms at the urban fringes, beyond and in between	Stagnation or decline of suburban settlements
Core assertion	Suburbanisation as a general mistake of European urban development	These suburban spaces are neglected and misunderstood for long, but represent a legitimate part of the European city	"It's over" - Suburbia is coming to an end, for demographic, social and economic reasons
Discourse practice	Contradictory, but overall critical assessment of these developments	Emphasising and further analysing related areas, focusing on the built environment	
Stakeholders	Urban planners, urban researchers, urban policy makers	Urban planners, urban researchers, architects	Researchers, journalists, architects, new urbanists

Source: the author.

On suburbanisation and the emergence of suburbia

11   In the past few decades urban development in a majority of the highly industrialised countries was characterised by tendencies of spatial de-concentration. This was also true for cities in the Federal Republic of Germany during the period after World War II (for more details see Burdack and Hesse, 2006, 2007, to which the next two sections particularly refer). The de-concentration process first affected large agglomerations where an out-migration of the population and increased employment created extended suburban zones around the central cities (BBR, 2005a: 191ff.). Parallel to this process an increasing de-concentration of economic activities was registered, partly as a reaction to the suburbanisation of the population, as in the case of household-oriented services, and partly caused by the intrinsic locational dynamics of certain economic activities such as manufacturing (Müller and Rohr-Zänker, 2006). As early as in the 1970s space consuming activities like wholesale trade and logistics exhibited a preference for suburban locations with good accessibility (Hesse, 1999). In contrast, high-level producer services remained more strongly attached to city centres, with certain exceptions such as the Rhine-Main region and Stuttgart (Eisenreich, 2001).

12   Since the 1980s growth dynamics in large agglomerations had been shifting further from the old cores toward the urban fringes and the rural surroundings (Hesse and Schmitz, 1998; Schönert, 2003). Medium-sized cities outside the metropolitan areas began to form their own suburban rings. Central cities and surrounding areas merged into functional urban regions that now form the spatial basis of daily activity systems for a majority of the population (Parr, 2004, 2005). This process varied in different metropolitan areas, depending on specific

historical and spatial settings: monocentric metropolitan areas such as Hamburg or Munich had different spatial patterns than polycentric regions like the Ruhr, Rhine-Main, Rhine-Neckar or Stuttgart, where typical suburban locations had been traditionally mixed with older centres. The Berlin metropolitan area, where the division of Germany had formed two separate territories, presented a special case: For different political reasons, suburbanisation processes took place predominantly within city boundaries until reunification in 1989-90, particularly in the western part of Berlin (cf. Hesse, 2008b: 16ff.).

13   With the expansion of settlement and commuting areas, urban system and central place hierarchy have changed as well. Commuting areas were expanding beyond the first and second rings of suburbanisation, according to the ideal-typical curve of land prices. On the demand side, the more or less economically rational behaviour of actors, who are attracted by low prices for rents and real estate, is generally regarded as a central impetus for suburbanisation. On the supply side, growth strategies of suburban communities with extensive supplies of developable land have to be mentioned, making regional planning controls inefficient (Aring, 1999). Accessibility was always an important factor for suburbanisation. However, today the negative effects of high traffic volumes are regarded as among the most serious problems of suburban areas (Hesse and Scheiner, 2007). The fact that the once sharp phenomenological distinction between the spatial categories of 'town' and 'country' is increasingly blurred has also been criticised. The adjustment of living conditions, and concomitantly of spatial settlement structures, is an almost inevitable consequence of modernisation: The more suburbia appears 'mature', i.e. the higher the settlement densities of suburban locations become, the more heterogeneous their social structures are, and the supplementation of residential uses by other functions becomes more likely (Hesse and Scheiner, 2007). In this context suburban areas begin to resemble the original properties of cities (Hesse, 2008b: 18).

14   Subsequent to the events of 1989/1990, the dynamics of suburbanisation became accelerated by the process of reunification in Germany (Siedentop et al., 2003; IÖR et al., 2005). It especially led to rapid suburbanisation in eastern Germany which persisted until the end of the 1990s. Major reasons for this acceleration were a lack of regional planning guidance concerning the limitation of land offers within suburban communities, fiscal incentives for new housing construction, and restrictions on inner city construction due to unsettled claims for property restitution. Suburbanisation dynamics became significantly weaker in the late 1990s, and came to an almost complete stop in eastern Germany with the exception of the Berlin metropolitan area. Starting after 1998 or in the early 2000s, eastern German urban regions even reported a reversal of the migration direction in favour of central cities (Herfert, 2002: 338). In eastern German regions, this reversal is likely to be more than just a brief cyclical interruption of a continuous de-concentration trend. Western German regions continued to de-concentrate, but the focus has shifted from the outer suburban areas to the urban fringes and to inner city districts (Siedentop et al., 2003). Counter-urbanisation tendencies that were still noticeable in the 1990s have almost stopped. Since 2000, large western German cities have once again exhibited a positive development of population and occupation (cf. Hesse, 2008b: 17).

15   As a consequence of the tendencies outlined above, suburban areas had experienced a substantial – if regionally differentiated – re-evaluation during the last few decades (Clapson, 2003). They did not separate functionally from the central cities but have become integral parts of newly formed, larger urban regions. The different parts of such urban regions are increasingly differentiated and selectively used in the course of what might be called a 'regionalisation of daily life': One resides in the countryside or in the city, depending on income and certain phases of the life cycle, one works either in suburbia or in the inner city, and leisure time occurs both in suburban areas and in metropolitan cultural centres (Priebs, 2004). Thus, the spatial fix-point of the organisation of everyday life is no longer the city

centre, but the individually shaped networks of activities, which may stretch over the entire urban region and beyond. Urban research and regional planning reacted to these changes by designating new concepts and new spatial categories.

16   It is notable that the official report on spatial planning and development commissioned by the German Federal Government (*Raumordnungsbericht 2005*) introduced a new category of spatial analysis, the *Zwischenraum* (intermediate space). This was perceived as positioned in-between the *Zentralraum* (central space) and *Peripherraum* (peripheral space), all being characterised by specific properties concerning centrality, population potential, and accessibility (BBR, 2005a and b). Spatial categories for suburban areas are *äußerer Zentralraum* (outer central space) and *Zwischenraum mit Verdichtungsansätzen* (intermediate space with agglomeration tendencies). A different approach pursued by Siedentop et al. (2003) defined a radius of 60 kilometres around the centre of an agglomeration as being suburban. By subtracting central cities from the total area inside this circle, it was estimated that about two thirds of the population lived in the suburbs and about half of all employment was located there.

17   Generally speaking, the development of European metropolitan peripheries is, however, less dynamic than discourses on 'postmodern urbanism' once had suggested (see Dear and Flusty, 1998; Jonas 1999). European metropolitan areas clearly follow an own trajectory. There is no decentring of the centre taking place in major European city-regions. Rather, a pronounced intra-regional division of labour between the inner cities and metropolitan peripheries is maintained (see e.g. Lowe, 2000; Phelps and Parsons, 2003). High-level producer services and head office-functions remain prevalent for the most part to the inner cities, while the metropolitan peripheries in Europe are gaining strength as locations of research and development and higher education (Bontje and Burdack, 2005). The changes that are currently taking place do not reveal signs of a 'dissolution' of European cities, but may rather be described as a re-scaling of urban activities on the spatial scale of the urban region.

Suburbia as subject to discourses of policy and planning

18   Normative approaches to suburbanisation in Germany were for a long time dominated by a critical assessment. This hegemonic "meta-discourse" was based on apparently objective findings concerning the costs and benefits of de-concentration and dispersion on the one hand, and on more subjective estimates concerning suburban settlements' lack of urbanity and poor architectural quality on the other hand. These evaluations emerged from implicit or explicit comparisons of suburban settlements with inner city locations, particularly concerning settlement densities, urbanity, infrastructure costs and traffic generation. Individual decisions about the location of households and firms caused substantial costs and negative externalities, particularly with respect to infrastructure, traffic and the environment which have not been taken into account to their full extent. At the same time policy goals such as the provision of single-family homes and particularly the promotion of home ownership were silently approved by politics and planning, in response to the demand of a majority of customers. As a result, the aggregate of individual decisions contrasts with overall community or policy goals, not to mention the concept of sustainability with its complex and contradictory setting.

19   According to the BBR (2001: 9), "*Suburbanisation has diverse negative consequences, and it undermines an important objective of spatial planning in Germany - to support a decentralised, concentrated settlement development. Increasing suburbanisation causes problems for central cities and suburban areas: The central cities are being deserted and their infrastructure facilities are not used to full capacity, while the municipalities of the surrounding areas have difficulties in providing the necessary social services at the same time. The increasing urbanisation of the urban fringe due to land demands for retailing, housing as well as industrial and commercial building reduces the supply of open spaces in city regions*".

20   These sentences reveal, roughly speaking, the rationale of the leading discursive pattern that critically discusses suburbanisation from a policy and planning perspective. The roots of such main discourse of "dystopian suburbia" are manifold and go back to some fundamental ideas in urban studies. The writings in urban sociology of the early 20th century (e.g. Louis Wirth, Ferdinand Tönnies, Robert Park) and also post-War urban research and urban planning (William Whyte, Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs) were a major source of inspiration not only in the Anglo-Saxon community but in Europe as well. Nicolaides (2006) called it a "perceptual migration" of the bad to the suburbs, after which the suburbs were no longer conceived of as the city's benevolent partners but their destroyers. "*Suburbia – that vast and aimless drift of human beings, spreading in every direction about our cities, large and small – demonstrates the incapacity of our civilization to foster concrete ways and means for living well*" according to Mumford (1921: 44). Such a "critical" yet actually single-minded position was maintained and further developed during the mass-suburbanisation of the 1960s and 1970s, but still in use during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in critical urban studies and planning. The conventional image of suburbia as a dull, boring place expressing the standardised way of life of the suburban middle-class was also subject of a broad coverage in the media and thus part of the popular culture. The movies directed by Sam Mendes (i.e. *American Beauty* from 1999, *Revolutionary Road* from 2008) and TV-series such as *Desperate Housewives* may be considered most famous and iconic in terms of reflecting typical properties of the suburban society.

21   Evolving from a comparative view, not coincidentally the term "Americanisation" had emerged in German discourses and was used to highlight a certain transfer of ideas across the Atlantic. Such tendencies had been particularly framed in post-modern geography and critical urban sociology, in order to point at similarities and differences between the development of North American (notably U.S.) and European cities. In the context of a transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist city, some authors were identifying a process of a re-definition of urban structures and urban policy which received a major push from American developments (cf. Häussermann, 1997: 92) It was exactly this comparison that gave birth to the emerging *leitbild* of "The European City" characterised by compactness, high density and short distances, thus overarching the metadiscourse on sustainable urban development. Correspondingly, the negative counter piece was the suburbs.

22   However, the simple disqualification of suburban areas as anti-urban and unsustainable overlooks the fact that the criteria for such evaluation are mainly derived from properties of the inner cities and are thus not sufficient for investigating the urban fringe. Traditional terms and concepts do not necessarily fit to explain or solve new problems. This applies particularly to North American suburbs, yet to a significant extent to Europe as well. According to Kruse and Sugrue (2006: 1), "*traditional categories for understanding the varieties of the American experience – race, class, gender – have been thoroughly reshaped by the process of suburbanization and reshuffled into newer, more complex arrangements*". By pointing at urban settlements, Wilson (1995: 15) referred to the juxtaposition of 'good' historical city and 'ugly' suburban patch-work patterns as representing 'propagandistic polarities' that do not properly address the variety of both urban and suburban developments.

23   Regarding the German discourse, it was first and foremost Sieverts' (1997) conceptual framework of the *Zwischenstadt* that delivered a milestone for reflecting the diverse paths of suburbanisation more accurately. It appeared in 2003 in English (carrying the somehow misleading title *Cities without cities*, compared to *Entre-ville*, the probably more apt title of the 2004 French edition). The *Zwischenstadt* represents the most influential contra-discourse opposing the hegemony of the European City in more recent times. The term *Zwischenstadt* hints at Rowe's (1991) book *Middle Landscape*. Sieverts (1997) claimed that suburban developments should be discussed without prejudice as a new type of decentralised settlement

structure. The topology of the *Zwischenstadt* was developed from its intermediate character, which includes characteristics of the morphology (built environment, open space) as well as social issues. The concept of the *Zwischenstadt* was widely discussed in professional and academic circles. At least in Germany, any other single idea concerning urban development and planning in the 1990s triggered a comparable amount of debate and dispute. The *Zwischenstadt* marked an extremely important blind spot in theoretical discourses on urban issues.

24   The studies in the context of the *Zwischenstadt* proceeded between 2002 and 2005 under the auspices of the Ladenburger Kolleg(Boelling and Sieverts, 2004). The research efforts of the Kolleg were concentrated on the Rhine-Main Region, a metropolitan region where all the elements of the *Zwischenstadt* are present: Successive processes of growth and dispersion, differentiation, and re-concentration had formed a mosaic of old village centres, new housing subdivisions and old industrial sites, which contradicts all the traditional images of the European city. The different components of the *Zwischenstadt* filled up the open areas between the old town centres, structured them and made them 'central' in very specific ways. Some sub-areas profited from their proximity to the old town centres, others developed quite distinct.

25   Once examining suburbia more analytically, however, the *Zwischenstadt* left open several questions (cf. Burdack and Hesse, 2007: 92). First, it remained unclear what exactly was meant by this term, which in fact relates to a deliberately "fuzzy" use of the concept. The term was used and interpreted in different ways: It addresses (1) the classical suburban areas at the outskirts of agglomerations, but also (2) such parts of suburbia that lie in-between different central cities and exhibit rather hybrid settlement characters, and finally (3) rural areas where densification and urbanization tendencies are beginning to take place, and which have usually been referred to as the urban and semi-urban periphery. This particular discourse thus left behind substantial problems of definition, which can only partially be accounted for by the variety of suburban settlement structures.

26   A second problem is marked by the question how far generalisations can be derived from Sieverts' arguments: The concept of the *Zwischenstadt* was developed on the basis of the Ruhr district and the Rhine-Main region. These two represent prototypical polycentric metropolitan regions which conform much less to the classical image of a city with its surrounding suburbs than most other urban regions in Germany do. The space of the *Zwischenstadt* consists of old industrial cities (Hoechst, Rüsselsheim) located next to new, service-oriented locations (Eschborn), as well as many fast spreading residential locations, industrial parks, and shopping facilities – thus very heterogeneous land uses, to which there is hardly any common denominator. Behind such irritating multitude of development there still lingers the above-mentioned problem of definition. It also remains unclear how long these development paths will continue to work, given further demographic changes that commenced in the early 21st Century, contributing to a certain backdrop in suburbanisation (cf. Burdack and Hesse, 2007).

27   After having perceived the idea associated with the *Zwischenstadt* in quite a reserved way for almost a decade, official regional planning policy in Germany now has recognised the emergence of settlement structures in-between town and country. By releasing the *Raumordnungsbericht 2005* (see above), the government considered suburban areas as a more or less regular part of the contemporary city region (see also BBR, 2004). The meta-discourse became finally accepted. One of the next steps would be to investigate urban change at fringe areas more deeply and to discuss the opportunities of dealing with its consequences in terms of policy and planning.

28   However, in the context of demographic change and its differentiated outcomes, the next paradigm shift emerged, viewing suburban areas as spaces of decline, again quite distinct from earlier spatial narratives. The velocity of such changes in the predominant course patterns is astonishing. Whereas certain urban discourses in Germany (not necessarily those dealing

with suburbanisation) had until recently been dominated by the perception of urban decline and, particularly, by the phenomenon of "shrinkage", discourse is now shifting towards emphasising specific changes in suburban areas. It is undoubted that there are certain material developments triggering such perceptions (see above). However, the degree to which such changes appear indicates that to some extent discourses tend to be decoupled from what can be identified as 'material' reality; according to discourse theory, they represent new forms of materiality. Once analysing urban change and decline in the U.S., Beauregard (1993: 247) observed similar shifts: "*The difficulty of achieving consensus on the meaning of demographic evidence had never prevented commentators from emphasizing one trend over another, particularly when it came to sightings of decline. Yet, through most of the 1980s the discourse on urban decline virtually disappeared. Dominant was revival, revitalization, renascence and rediscovery; decline was thrust to the rear of the public stage. This was an abrupt shift in emphasis from that of the mid-seventies*".

29   Given substantial differences in the urban landscape, it is a common property of urban discourses in North America and Europe that they exhibit a delicate relationship to material processes. Moreover, they may be subject to immediate changes, according to the particular perception of urban developments in society.

Future suburb – the next slum?

30   The current debate of declining suburbs indicates an abrupt change in the perception of city and suburbs. It seems to reverse a long-standing attribute of European urban development: the growth of suburban areas resulting from, and contributing to, the expansion of towns and cities beyond their administrative, functional or morphological borders. As a result of shifting socio-economic framework conditions, discourse formations are changing again. Concomitantly, disparate assessments of the suburbs have recently become more popular. Now stagnation or even decline in population and occupation are being observed in suburban areas as well, not only in core cities.Demographic change is identified as a major driving force behind these processes, particularly the aging of the baby-boomer cohorts and thus of the single-family housing areas of the post-WW II era, also a changing regime of housing- and real estate-markets and the expected future increase in energy prices. Such factors could seriously question the mechanisms that constitute suburbia – particularly cheap mobility – and thus make life in dispersed, suburban areas increasingly unattractive. Will suburbia be the loser of socio-economic change, and, even more, become the "next slum" (Leinberger, 2008)?

31   As it was often the case in the history of suburbanisation, such trends appear to be particularly significant in the U.S. This is mainly based on two particularities of U.S. developments – and thus delimits the possible range of comparison: On the one hand, the degree of sub- and ex-urbanisation seems to be quite advanced compared to the situation in Europe (and is also caused by a broader set of factors); on the other hand, mortgage-financed housing that became extremely popular in the U.S. has imploded as a result of the credit-crunch and the associated collapse of real estate-markets. Within a few months, suburban households in fast-growing regions particularly of the American West (like Nevada, California, and Arizona) were facing problems of insolvency, foreclosure and associated displacement.

32   It remains to be seen how this phenomenon and its consequences will develop in the near future and what could be learned from that experience. However, besides the extreme problem that is apparent in fiscally collapsing suburban real estates, it is evident that many *old suburbs* are facing the challenge of periodical or cyclical decline, caused by selective migration, disinvestment or simply aging in the context of certain urban development trajectories. According to recent surveys, it is estimated that almost 15 per cent of the old or inner suburbs in the U.S. are subject to such changes (Short et al., 2007; Hanlon, 2008).

33   Besides these problems, the argument outlined by writers like Leinberger continues a historical trajectory of anti-suburban rhetoric and thus adds to the once hegemonic discourse – as does its hasty transfer to the obviously different situation in Europe. In line with its predecessors from the early 20th century, it considers suburbia representing a fault, an error of excessive (according to Beauregard: "parasitic") urbanisation, rather than as a regular expression of the city, which has been changing over the most recent past. However, there are several issues that have to be taken into account in order to critically read and assess both the newly arisen anti-suburban rhetoric and also the manifold material developments behind:

34   First, the partial decline of suburban areas is anything but new: growth and decline of cities had always happened at their fringes as well (Lenger and Schott, 2007) – even if this phenomenon did by far not exhibit the degree of change that occurred in core cities. The history of urban development or, more precisely, urbanisation in Europe and in North America has always been more diverse, more colourful than the conventional image of declining inner cities and growing, wealthy suburbs once had suggested.

35   Second, and closely associated to the first point, the new suburban reality is complex and looks quite different from traditional stereotypes, as much of the literature at both sides of the Atlantic has proven (see e.g. Bourne, 1996; Clapson, 1998, 2003; Harris and Larkham, 1999; Hanlon et al., 2006; Knox 2008). This particular point was also demonstrated by *The Economist* (29 May 2008) which took readers to explore the case of Willingboro, 15 miles east of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA: "*Walk around Willingboro in the evening and you will see homeowners mowing their lawns and children squirting each other with water pistols, just as they did when the neighbourhood was much more homogenous. Mr Jones, the pastor, calls it 'an ordinary place', which is an excellent description. It is a reflection of the resilience of the suburban model that such places have changed dramatically while remaining essentially humdrum. At their best, they are even rather dull*".

36   Third, it is crucial to distinguish between the *process* of suburbanisation and the associated spatial *structure* of suburbia. Whereas the former is subject to ongoing alterations, depending on socio-economic framework conditions, spatial division of labour, local development pressure etc., the latter will probably remain as a core component of urban realities in the future.

37   Fourth, it is subject of controversial debate how to properly assess the precise nature of most recent empirical developments: Does the deceleration of suburbanisation indicate a swing of the pendulum, or is it part of a secular turn – the demise of the classical, growth related urban expansion through suburbanisation? It could be argued that the suburbs are now experiencing problems just because they resemble the contemporary city itself – not because their life-cycle is coming to an end.

38   Fifth, it has to be noted that comparisons may have their particular pitfalls and offer methodological traps: More differentiated analyses should take into account that many problems apparently associated with *sub-urbanisation* in the U.S. do in fact relate to *ex-urban* areas with their extreme degree of dispersion, high distances to urban centres (and related excessive commutes), big size of lots and houses etc. Much of what is currently circulating in pertinent communities and the 'feuilleton' on the apparent farewell to suburbia is far from evidence and misses a solid empirical foundation.

39   Taken altogether, there is no serious indication of a turnaround taking place in the suburbanisation as yet that would justify the swan song to suburbia. Nevertheless, discourse patterns have changed significantly. And there is some good reason to believe that mid-term urban and regional dynamics in Europe will probably favour centres and core city areas rather than the outer city. This process is closely linked with specific life-cycles of urban development and urban areas, not least triggered by structural changes in industry and services which are predominant since the late 1980s/early 1990s. By opening up former industrial or

warehousing sites, these changes have provided an enlarged portion of space in core urban areas and thus offered a tremendous potential for major urban redevelopment projects. Yet the related re-concentration represents a temporary policy window and is quite specific in terms of target groups and main driving forces. It is far from being considered a general pattern of land use and urban development. It is also important to note that spatial structures tend to exhibit a relatively high degree of inertia, which means that the promise and the problems of suburbia will remain in function for a considerable time in the future.

Outlook

40　　As a consequence of the developments discussed above, the task of coping with suburban decline will appear on the agenda of policy and planning (cf. Vicino, 2008). This is indeed a big challenge for policy makers, since related experience is – if at all – primarily based on the transformation of core cities, rather than on dealing with declining outer areas. A major problem in this respect is that suburban decline instead of growth means a reversal of the traditional development path of suburbia. Related problems of adaptation can be observed both in terms of material developments and of 'discursive realities': It is fairly uncommon for local actors – developers, policy makers, homeowners – to acknowledge cases of suburban decline and to seek for strategies beyond the traditional growth paradigm (Zakirova, under preparation).

41　　In a more practical sense, suburban decline triggers many questions: In how far may such areas offer potentials for adapting to stagnation or even to decline? Could more or less centrally situated parts of suburbia be graded up, by deliberate urbanisation? How about the related chances of *place making*? Any search for solutions would have to differentiate between major types of suburban areas: low density housing areas with poor urban amenities and located in greater distance to urban centres may indeed be facing serious problems, particularly once imploding real estate-markets are leaving behind an increasingly fragmented urban structure. On the contrary, suburban pockets close to inner city-areas or those suburban settlements that provide minimum density and amenities may be more suitable for retrofit. Certainly, future adaptations could also include to restrict space for new developments but to prioritise infill and densification. However: this may be unpopular given the simple economic (competitive) rationale of municipalities that makes them developing land further – as long as there is a certain demand for.

42　　In this respect, looking at other countries could be truly inspiring, particularly in those cases where urban developments are much less normatively disputed than the compact vs. de-centralised city controversy in Europe suggests. In Great Britain or North America, strategies for revitalising suburban areas are actively pursued. This is not only a consequence of the higher degree of suburbanisation in general (compared to continental Europe), yet also indicates an unprejudiced debate being held in policy and planning on this subject (see e.g. Kochan and TCPA, 2007). It can be argued that European urban policy and planning – which is mainly focusing on inner cities as yet – will have to deal with these issues in the near future as well, regardless whether this is in line with their normative goals or not.

43　　Finally, there are certain strategic and methodological conclusions that can be drawn from a longer-term analysis of changing discourse patterns and rationales. First, it seems to be wise to examine the subject of research precisely, yet without too much engagement and normative presumptions, both as interested as possible and as reserved as necessary. Second, the past should not be automatically extrapolated into the future. Careful research has to take into account the ever changing framework conditions and their specific influence on observed processes. (Or would one have predicted the breakdown of the financial 'market' and thus the struggle of globalization?). Third, one has to be sensitive against imaginaries, construction and discourse and put such issues on the research agenda. They represent an important, yet often

overlooked part of both the material and immaterial realities around, with blurring boundaries between the two, so as the urban and the rural increasingly tend to coalesce.

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