

7 Suburbanisation, Suburbia and „Zwischenstadt“: Perspectives of Research and Policy

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Introduction

Theoretic discourses and empirical findings related to the process of suburbanisation and the resulting spatial category of suburbia have long been dominated by critical assessments of metropolitan growth, the decline of inner cities and associated problems (with regard to land use, transport, tax distribution). More recently, following the rising significance of sub- and exurban development in North America as well as in Europe, research and planning attitudes towards suburbia have become more pluralistic. It is now more acknowledged that edge urban developments represent a legitimate component of the urban fabric.

The new research and planning attitudes about urban outskirts are related to the observation of new urban forms, coined in terms like edge city¹, post-modern urbanism², post-suburbia³, or “Zwischenstadt”⁴. Respective discourse points out new qualities in regional development and policy: the spatial category suburbia is no longer only negatively evaluated, but perceived in a differentiated way. It is thus becoming the object of policies and strategies for improvement and further development, rather than that of disregard and negation. In this context, this paper aims at giving a condensed overview of the state and dynamics of the subject, how it is being discussed, and which consequences for research, policy and planning may result from this perspective.⁵ This paper provides an overview of the state of suburbanisation research in Germany and Europe and also of the theoretical concepts which are put forward – both in Germany and internationally – to deal with it. The spatial category suburbia which resulted from the dynamic suburbanisation processes in the second half of the 20th century is then analysed. In the foreseeable future, stagnation and shrinking phenomena are likely to shape the agenda again. The paper’s final section therefore discusses which future perspectives exist for suburbanisation and the further development of suburbia in the context of demographic change and urban shrinkage.

¹ Garreau (1991)

² Dear/Flusty (1998)

³ Kling et al. (1995)

⁴ Sieverts (1997)

⁵ For an earlier version of the paper, see Burdack/Hesse (2006)

7.1 Suburbanisation and Suburbia in Germany

In the past few decades urban development in a majority of the highly industrialized countries was characterized by tendencies of spatial de-concentration. This was also true for cities in the Federal Republic of Germany during the period following World War II. 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.⁶

Parallel to this process – sometimes with a certain time lag – 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, like manufacturing for example.⁷ As early as the 1970s space consuming activities like wholesale trade and logistics exhibited a preference for suburban locations with good accessibility.⁸ High-level producer services, on the other hand, remained more strongly attached to city centres, with certain exceptions such as the Rhine-Main region and Stuttgart.⁹

Since the 1980s growth dynamics in large agglomerations have been gradually shifting from the old cores to the urban fringes and the rural surroundings.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.

With the expansion of settlement and commuting areas, the system of settlement structures and the central place hierarchy changed as well. The growth of commuting areas often followed the ideal-typical curve of land prices.¹² 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

⁶ BBR (2005a) p 191ff

⁷ Kahnert (1998)

⁸ Hesse (1999)

⁹ Eisenreich (2001)

¹⁰ Hesse/Schmitz (1998); Schönert (2003)

¹¹ Priebs (2004)

¹² Motzkus (2002)

extensive supplies of developable land, which made regional planning controls inefficient, have to be mentioned.¹³ While accessibility was an important factor for suburbanisation, the negative effects of high traffic volumes are regarded today as among the most pressing problems of suburban areas. 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, however, an almost inevitable consequence of modernization: The more suburbia appears ‘mature’, i.e., the higher the settlement densities of suburban locations become, the more heterogeneous their social structures, and the supplementation of residential uses by other functions becomes more likely. In this context suburban areas begin to resemble the original properties of cities.

The process of reunification in Germany in 1990 represented a big step forward for suburbanisation dynamics in Germany.¹⁴ It especially led to accelerated 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. These factors steered a large portion of the demand for housing and retail facilities to the outskirts. Suburbanisation dynamics have been declining significantly since the end of the 1990s, and came to an almost complete stop in eastern Germany with the exception of the Berlin metropolitan area. Some eastern German urban regions even reported a reversal of the migration direction in favour of central cities.¹⁵ This reversal is likely to be more than just a brief cyclical interruption of a continuous de-concentration tendency. In western Germany the de-concentration process continues, but its focus has shifted from the outer suburban areas to the urban fringes, that is to say, closer to city centres.¹⁶ Counter-urbanization tendencies that were still noticeable in the 1990s have stopped, and the overall intensity of suburbanisation has diminished. Since 2000, large western German cities have once again exhibited positive population development.

Summing up the tendencies outlined above, it can be stated that suburban areas have experienced a substantial – if regionally differentiated – revaluation during the last few decades. 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 ‘*regionalization of ways of life*’: One lives 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

¹³ Aring (1999)

¹⁴ Siedentop et al. (2003); IÖR et al. (2005)

¹⁵ Herfert (2002) p 338

¹⁶ Siedentop et al. (2003)

in suburban areas and in metropolitan cultural centres.¹⁷ Thus, the spatial fix-point of the organization 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. The "Raumordnungsbericht 2005" (Federal Report on Spatial Planning and Development) introduced a new spatial category, "Zwischenraum" (intermediate space), which is positioned between the "Zentralraum" (central space) and "Peripherraum" (peripheral space) and which is characterised by specific properties concerning centrality, population potential, and accessibility.¹⁸ Spatial categories for suburban areas are "äußerer Zentralraum" (outer central space) and "Zwischenraum mit Verdichtungsansätzen" (intermediate space with agglomeration tendencies) and are shown in Fig. 1. A different approach by Siedentop¹⁹ 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.²⁰

7.2 International Perspectives: Suburbia and Beyond

In a broad perspective, two patterns of suburban development can be differentiated in western Europe.²¹ First, urban areas in north-western Europe were dominated by tendencies of suburbanisation in the 1960s and 1970s and afterwards frequently by de-urbanisation, resulting in a population loss within the entire urban region. The large urban regions in southern Europe experienced high population growth in the central cities until the 1970s due to in-migration from rural areas. Second, since the 1980s, a transition to suburbanisation tendencies has been observed, with diminishing population growth rates within central cities, whereas suburban areas have experienced an additional increase. International comparative analyses of suburbanisation processes in Europe pose problems due to the absence of suitable data bases. Attempts to provide updated databases for urban and metropolitan regions in Europe have thus far yielded only limited success.²² It remains to be seen whether the ESPON project, which identified 1595 functional urban areas and 76 MEGAs (Metropolitan European Growth Areas), will be more successful in this respect.²³

¹⁷ Priebs (2004)

¹⁸ BBR (2005a); BBR (2005b)

¹⁹ Siedentop et al. (2003)

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ KEG (1991); Rozenblat/Cicille (2003)

²² e.g. NUREC (1994); GEMACA (1998)

²³ KEG (2004) p 17

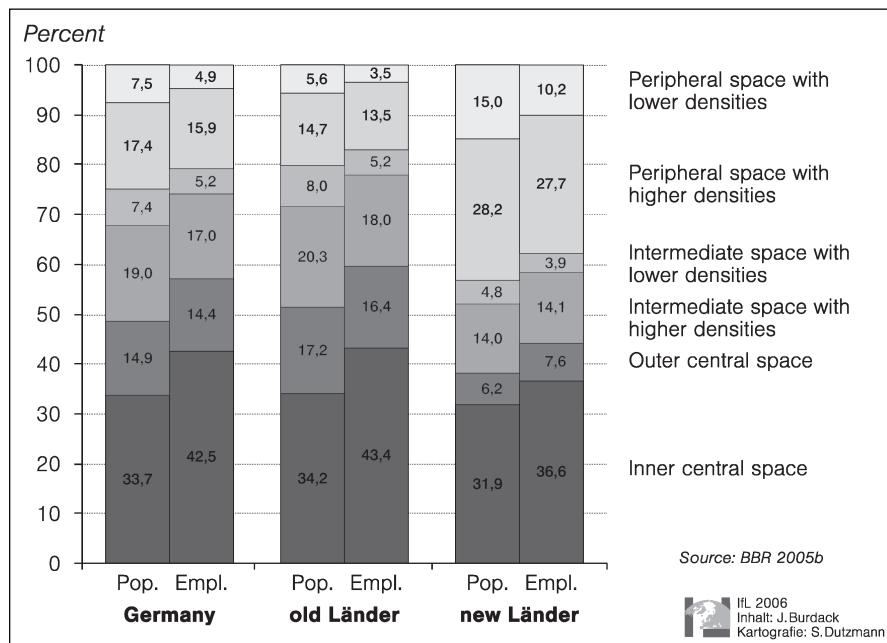


Fig.1: Distribution of Population and Employment according to Spatial Categories 2003
Source: Burdack and Hesse 2006 (modified)

The unsatisfactory data situation is one of the reasons why international comparative analyses are usually performed on the basis of case studies. A study on the outskirts of 11 northern, southern and western European cities,²⁴ for instance, points out similar spatial structures and development on the urban fringes of all case study areas. The outskirts have developed according to network structures that are based on accessibility, rather than on proximity. Patchwork structures were found to result from the overlay of different networks and the formation of places as nodes within the nets. Residential patterns in the outskirts often follow a principle of maximization concerning contact to green spaces, e.g., ribbons of development or isolated locations. This contributes to the suburban settlement structures having a kind of fragmented appearance.

Suburbanisation research on Central and Eastern European cities effectively started in the 1990s, once socialist planning economies had been replaced by market mechanisms and the first signs of de-centralisation became noticeable. One and a half decades after the demise of socialist systems in Eastern Europe, a considerable body of research exists on suburbanisation processes in post-socialist cities. Much of the work is regionally focused on cities such as Budapest, Moscow, Prague,

²⁴ Dubois-Taine (2003); Borsdorf/Zembri (2004)

Warsaw or other capital regions, where such processes have been most visible.²⁵ Despite the regional differences, some general conclusions may be drawn from this research:

- Residential suburbanisation of middle-class households has become an important trend. The new suburban settlements do not form complete new rings around the central city, but are concentrated in certain geographic sectors or along certain transport corridors. Large parts of the urban peripheries are inhabited by lower-class populations. Social disparities between upper-class new suburbanites and the lower-class, old-established population are prevalent.
- Large scale suburban shopping centres form an important part of the metropolitan retail trade, for instance in Èerni Most and Zlién (Prague) or Budakalász (Budapest). International retail chains were the principal investors (e.g. Auchan, Metro, Tesco). They were searching for accessible sites along highway interchanges or subway terminal stations. Logistic centres and modern manufacturing sites are also increasingly found on metropolitan peripheries. There are only a few examples of more complex centres or new economic poles that also include offices and leisure facilities. The poles of Budaörs-Törökbálint southwest of Budapest and Chimki, northwest of Moscow, should be mentioned here. Due to the 'over-bounding' of many Eastern European cities (cities which have boundaries that extend far beyond their developed areas), typical suburban development can often be found within the urban fringes inside the administrative limits of the central city.

Studies of urban areas in Central and Eastern Europe have frequently focused on the question of whether suburbanisation processes within the transformation countries follow Western European development paths or not. Instead of a simple 'catch up' type of development, 'hybrid' development patterns of urban peripheries seem to emerge instead.²⁶ These developments consist of different mixes of (1) persisting structures developed under socialist conditions, (2) elements of transition and transformation, and (3) new suburban and post-suburban spatial structures.

There is also significant evidence that the outskirts in many European metropolitan regions have entered a phase of re-concentration. To an increasing extent, such 'post-suburban' multi-functional spaces²⁷ show characteristics which had long been limited to analyses made of city centres.²⁸ Economic poles developed in the

²⁵ e.g., Andrle (2001); Brade/Nefjodowa (1998); Burdack et al. (2004); Degórska (2003); Fassmann/Matznetter (2005); Jakóbczyk-Gryszkiewicz (2002); Kok/Kovacs (1999); Ladányi/Szelényi (1999); Ouředníček (2005); Rudolph/Brade (2003); Rudolph/Brade (2005); Sykora (1999); Sykora et al. (2000); Tammaru (2001); Timar/Varadi (2001); Węclawowicz (2005); Welch/Guerra (2001)

²⁶ Burdack et al. (2005)

²⁷ Kling et al. (1995)

²⁸ Burdack/Herfert (1998); Phelps/Parsons (2003)

outskirts are sometimes complementary to those found within central cities, but may compete with them as well. A well-researched example is the city of Zurich, where a complex patchwork of different land uses has been developed in Zürich-Nord. Not only branch offices are found here, but also national and international headquarters of multinational companies.²⁹ Another example is the London borough of Croydon, which was transformed from a dormitory suburb into a significant office and retail centre in the 1960s and 1970s. In more recent years, however, Croydon's growth has stagnated due to the rapid ageing of its office supply and increasing congestion problems.³⁰

Many concepts have meanwhile been developed to describe this phenomenon of new nodes or economic poles outside central cities. The best known term regarding North American development is 'edge city'³¹, with alternatives including 'technoburb'³² and 'exopolis'.³³ Such terms, however, often refer to one specific type of new centre outside the traditional city centre and specifically refer to the North American situation.³⁴ Ruth Rohr-Zänker³⁵ considers it unlikely that edge cities will ever emerge in Western Europe. Radical changes in the settlement structure in Europe will be held back by the different cultural values associated with cities, differences in the planning systems, and the contrasting form of political regulation. Higher population densities and denser urban networks mean that medium-sized towns in Western Europe often act as the focus, around which new functional centres in the outer hinterland of the metropolises crystallise. However, the economic conditions that favour the formation of new activity clusters outside central cities do exist in parts of Western Europe as well. Both in North America and Western Europe, the shift from industrial to post-industrial societies produced a shift of agglomeration advantages from the city scale to the scale of the urban region.³⁶

A study of new nodes and activity clusters in the outskirts of continental European metropolitan areas pointed at the emergence of polycentric structures.³⁷ New economic poles of edge city-like dimensions were found to have emerged in most of the regions studied. Prominent examples of new economic poles include the Budaörs-Törökbálint area west of Budapest with its proliferation of commercial activities and offices³⁸ and the Tres Cantos new town north of Madrid with an R&D and high tech-manufacturing profile³⁹. The emergence of new polycentric structures

²⁹ Hitz et al. (1992)

³⁰ Phelps (1998)

³¹ Garreau (1991); Jonas (1999)

³² Fishman (1987)

³³ Soja (1992)

³⁴ Dear/Flusty (1998)

³⁵ Rohr-Zänker (1996)

³⁶ Phelps/Ozawa (2003)

³⁷ Burdack et al. (2005)

³⁸ Izsák/Probáld (2003)

³⁹ Burdack (2002)

was found to be especially relevant in Paris (see Fig. 2). The Paris metropolitan region and the Dutch Randstad could be seen as two of the most advanced regions in Europe in terms of a more polycentric regional structure, in which new economic centres emerge as competitors to, and complementary partners of, the central cities. It might not be accidental that post-suburban development is most advanced in the two metropolitan areas that are located in the core region of the European space economy, the global integration zone (GIZ).⁴⁰ This fact points to a link between the dynamics of spatial restructuring and the level of integration into the global economy.

Generally speaking, the development of European metropolitan peripheries is, however, less dynamic than discourses on 'postmodern urbanism'⁴¹ have ever suggested. European metropolitan areas clearly do not follow a trajectory comparable to that of Los Angeles. There is no decentring of the centre taking place in major European metropolitan areas. Rather, a pronounced intra-regional division of labour between the inner cities and metropolitan peripheries is maintained. 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.⁴² 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.

7.3 Main Concepts of Suburbanisation Research

Suburbanisation research in Germany reached a first peak during the 1970s, parallel to the accelerated development of suburban areas.⁴³ It is somewhat surprising that studies from that time had been concentrating on a relatively limited set of issues: Important topics were (1) the determinants of processes leading to different intensities of suburbanisation, (2) the analyses of sub-processes such as the suburbanisation of population, services, manufacturing and trade, as well as (3) the repercussions of suburbanisation on the inner cities, which were generally seen as problematic, and (4) the effects of suburbanisation on the rural surroundings, which were perceived both in the sense of a revaluation of these areas and critically as "Zersiedelung" (urban sprawl).

New themes and approaches revealed a reviewed interest in questions of suburbanisation in the 1990s. First of all, sectoral aspects of suburbanisation found more interest, that is to say non-residential functions like transportation, leisure

⁴⁰ According to Mehlby (2000)

⁴¹ Dear/Flusty (1998)

⁴² Bontje/Burdack (2005)

⁴³ ARL (1975)

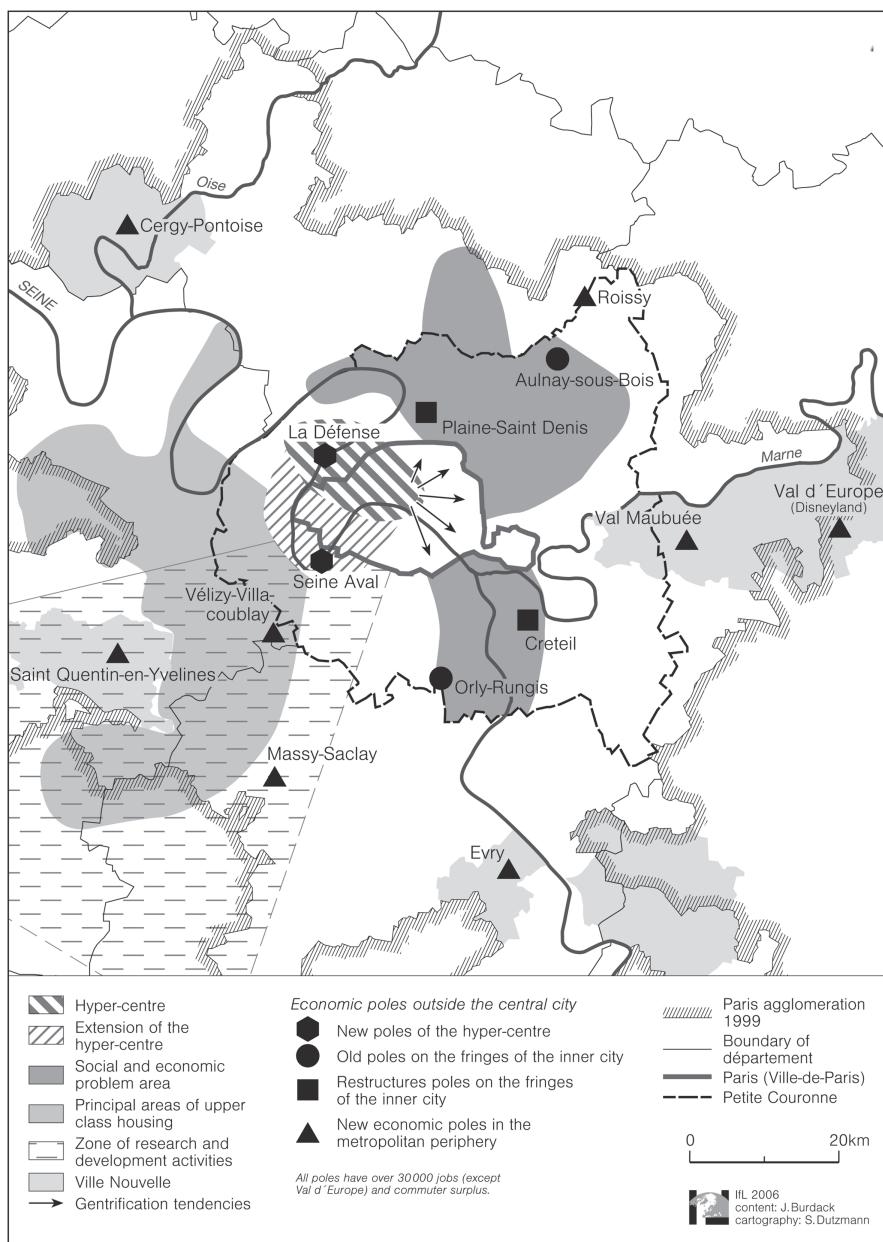


Fig.2: Social and economic polarisations in the Paris agglomeration. Source: Burdack (2004) modified.

activities, trade and services gained wider attention.⁴⁴ Secondly, actors on the micro-level and their motivation were analysed in numerous migration studies.⁴⁵ Thirdly, influenced by a discourse on the post-modern city, a change in perspective took place that revised the former critical judgements on suburbanisation to a certain degree: The spatial category 'suburbia' was no longer only critically evaluated, but regarded in a differentiated fashion. Such changes in perspective were, particularly in the German context, related to the concept of "Zwischenstadt" (in-between city).

Despite a substantial body of research, the term suburbanisation is still not clearly defined and is employed in a variety of fashions in German geographical research. Many topics of suburbanisation research in Germany are filed under different headings in other scientific cultures. A distinction, for instance, is made between *suburbanisation* and *urban sprawl* in British research. The term 'suburban area' designates single family and/or semi-detached housing areas in the outer parts of a city that were mostly constructed during the pre-war and post-war periods.⁴⁶ Urban sprawl on the other hand refers above all to forms of 'gluttonous' land use, monotonous development, bad traffic routes and infrastructure, as well as environmental damage and a lack of open space.⁴⁷ In French research, the dispersed patterns of settlement growth which occurred during the last few decades are addressed as *périurbanisation*⁴⁸.

The wide usage of the 'suburbanisation' label in German research somewhat blurs its content. This can be illustrated by the example of the term "suburbaner Raum" (suburban space). The term is used in at least three different ways. Frequently, the surrounding municipalities of a central city are simply called "suburbaner Raum." In this respect, the term is used according to the metaphor of space as a 'container'.⁴⁹ In this context "suburbaner Raum" begins at a city's boundaries, regardless of whether the actual land use patterns and spatial structures differ on either side of this dividing line or not. Crucial for labelling an element of the physical-material world as 'suburban' is only its location within a marked area on the surface of the earth.

A second use identifies "suburbaner Raum" as an intermediate spatial category based on density values, the properties of which are positioned between those of urban and rural areas. "Suburbaner Raum" thus becomes a cipher for dispersed settlement structure. In this context the urban area can extend beyond the border of a central city. This is, for instance, the case in the delineation of the city as settlement (morphological city). As outlined above, the new spatial classification scheme of

⁴⁴ Brake et al. (2001)

⁴⁵ IMU-Institut für Medienforschung (2001); Matthiesen (2002); Blotevogel/Jeschke (2003)

⁴⁶ Harris/Larkham (1999)

⁴⁷ Peiser (2001)

⁴⁸ Dézert/Metton/Steinberg (1991)

⁴⁹ Weichhart (1998) p 78

German regional planning policy⁵⁰ distinguishes between “Zentralraum” (central space), “Zwischenraum” (intermediate space), and “Peripherraum” (peripheral space) on the basis of the characteristics of density, population potential, and accessibility.

A third concept understands “suburbaner Raum” in the sense of ‘suburbia’ as a development phase or a ‘settlement layer’ on the urban periphery. Suburbia is the result of specific spatial processes, particularly the migration of young middle class households to the urban periphery and the related relocation of household services and retail activities that were made possible due to the wide availability of private cars. This more ‘relational’ use of the term “suburbaner Raum” forms the basis for sociological studies on the ‘suburban way of life’.⁵¹ In this context ‘suburbia’ may be interpreted as a certain phase in a broader development pattern. The concept of ‘post-suburbia’ which is particularly discussed in the US-American context⁵² is an attempt to describe the urban periphery’s next phase of development, following suburbanisation as we have known it until recently.

7.4 Suburbia in the Planner's Discourse: Polarized Interpretations and Blind Spots in the Discourse

For a long time the discussion about suburbanisation in Germany was dominated by a critical assessment. This assessment was based on allegedly 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. 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. It is certainly true that individual decisions about the location of households and firms caused substantial costs and negative externalities, particularly in respect to infrastructure, traffic, and the environment. Thus, there are considerable societal costs associated with suburbanisation that have not been taken into consideration to their full extent. The simple disqualification of suburban areas as anti-urban and unsustainable, however, overlooks the fact that the criteria for that kind of evaluation are mainly derived from characteristics of inner cities, and are thus not very useful. Traditional terms and concepts do not always contribute to the explanation or solution of new problems. Peter Wilson referred to the juxtaposition of ‘good’ historical city and ‘ugly’ suburban patch-work structures as ‘propagandistic polarities’.⁵³

⁵⁰ BBR (2005)

⁵¹ Gans (1968)

⁵² Kling et al. (1995)

⁵³ Wilson (1995) p 15

Thomas Sieverts' contribution⁵⁴ to the current suburbanisation discourse in Germany, mainly associated with the term "Zwischenstadt" (in-between city), fits into this line of argument. Sieverts demands that suburban developments should be discussed without prejudice as a new type of decentralised settlement structure. The term "Zwischenstadt" hints at Rowe's 'Middle Landscape'.⁵⁵ The topology of the "Zwischenstadt" was developed from its intermediate character, which results from characteristics of the built environment as well as from cultural dispositions. The concept of the "Zwischenstadt" was widely discussed in professional and academic circles in Germany. In Germany at least, no other single issue concerning urban development and planning in the 1990s triggered a comparable debate and dispute. The "Zwischenstadt" marked a blind spot in theoretical discourses on urban planning and development. At a more analytical level, however, the "Zwischenstadt" left open many questions. It remained unclear what exactly was meant by this term, which in fact relates to a deliberately 'fuzzy' use of the concept. The term, in fact, has different interpretations: 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 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. Another issue is to what degree Sieverts' arguments can be generalised: The concept of the "Zwischenstadt" was developed on the basis of the Ruhr District and the Rhine-Main Region, two 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 "Zwischenstadt" studies were continued between 2002 and 2005 in the framework of the "*Ladenburger Kolleg*".⁵⁶ The research efforts of the "*Ladenburger 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. Behind this almost irritating multitude of development there still lingers the above-mentioned problem of definition: 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

⁵⁴ Sieverts (1997); Sieverts (2003)

⁵⁵ Rowe (1991)

⁵⁶ Boelling/Sieverts (2004)

which there is hardly any common denominator. How long these development paths will continue to function also remains unclear. Official regional planning policy in Germany finally recognized the secular trend of suburbanisation and is now going to acknowledge suburban areas as a legitimate spatial category.⁵⁷ Yet, a precise definition of suburban areas that takes their diverse characteristics into account is still missing, despite a growing number of research activities devoted to 'suburbia' and also an intensified discourse about the question of how to deal with it in terms of policy and planning.

7.5 Perspectives on the Future of Suburbanisation Processes

The most recent discussion on urban development in Germany has taken place against the background of changing empirical trends: Since the turn of the century the suburbanisation process has come to a stop in many regions of eastern Germany and partly in western Germany as well. In most eastern German regions the growth processes subsided by the end of the 1990s: Out-migration and demographic change now increasingly dominate population and regional development. It is not yet foreseeable whether this turn-around is merely a pendulum swing or a secular turn, that is to say, the 'long goodbye' of an urban expansion process based on growth and suburbanisation.

Demographic and economic growth that translated into residential expansion is often considered fundamental to the suburbanisation process. An answer to the question of to what extent this settlement type can persist under the conditions of declining population figures and a stagnating economy depends on three factors, whose parameters are difficult to estimate at present: (1) the slope of the demographic curve, (2) the regional distribution of the population, and finally (3) the specific space requirements of households and firms, which in turn depend on different social, cultural and economic factors.

According to the Eleventh Co-ordinated Population Forecast of the "Statistisches Bundesamt", the German population will decline until the year 2050 from 82.4 million at the end of 2005 towards a total ranging between 69 and 74 million by 2050, depending on different scenarios including different reproduction and migration rates. Until 2030 the degree of change appears to be limited, whereas the decrease during the following two decades is predicted to accelerate significantly.⁵⁸ Given that there are some uncertainties with such long-term predictions, this development might have noticeable consequences for particular regions: Current estimates foresee the development of suburban growth belts around the central cities of northwest Germany, the Rhine axis between Bonn and Mannheim, as well as in many parts of Bavaria.⁵⁹ The outskirts of the Berlin metropolitan area and

⁵⁷ BBR (2004)

⁵⁸ Statistisches Bundesamt (2006)

⁵⁹ BBR (2006)

those of several large cities in Saxony will continue to gain population as well. The old-industrialized regions of the Ruhr District and eastern Germany, as well as peripheral rural areas, are, however, particularly threatened by demographic decline. Economic and demographic shrinking and welfare losses will be especially concentrated in the "Neue Länder" (new federal states).

And yet, we do not expect that tendencies of suburbanisation will stop under the conditions of a shrinking and stagnation of urban development, or that problems associated with suburbanisation will disappear automatically. Many of the factors and determinants that supported the suburbanisation process continue to function. The decreasing settlement pressure associated with shrinking has not yet provided any sufficient evidence about an end of suburbanisation, because suburbanisation is not only a reaction to high settlement pressures in the central city, but is also caused by urbanisation dis-economies, e.g., traffic congestion, environmental pollution, and a perception of rising crime levels. The significance of such motivating factors has already been expressed as "Stadtflucht" (flight from the city) by Heuer and Schäfer.⁶⁰ This escape-metaphor can also be found in the US-American context as 'flight to the suburbs', as well as in estimates of a decline of suburbanisation in Germany.⁶¹ A significant increase in re-urbanisation would require that central cities become the primary search areas of suburban households and enterprises, which is surely not the case in a general sense. It should be added that, given the functional change inner cities have undergone in becoming locations for high level service centres, new offices, and centres for leisure, tourism, and other events, a return to the city of, for instance, large-scale industrial premises or shopping centres, hardly makes sense.

Nuissl and Rink⁶² even argue that the containment of suburban development under the conditions of shrinking could become rather more difficult than in the context of growth. In the course of shrinking, an intensified competition among municipalities for investors and inhabitants is to be expected. Potential investors may have a strong bargaining position and can play municipalities off against each other. The informal, consensus-oriented instruments of German regional planning policy (e.g., "Regionalkonferenzen") are based on 'win-win' situations and have not yet been tested in respective 'win-lose' situations.

In the longer run we do indeed assume that a tendency towards the development of fragmented, perforated urban landscapes will become more likely. The old central city will be a part of this urban region, just as the different forms of "Zwischenstadt" are. The different parts of an urban region might even develop more or less precarious forms of coexistence, depending upon the specific conditions of growth and decline, and stretching or contraction of the urban spaces. The different centres and peripheries will probably be involved in a more intense competition with

⁶⁰ Heuer/Schäfer (1978)

⁶¹ Blotevogel/Jeschke (2003)

⁶² Nuissl/Rink (2004) p 35

one another. This process is in conflict with our traditional image of the city, but is essentially merely a continuation of urbanisation processes that started in the industrial age.

After the acceleration of the suburbanisation process in Germany in the 1990s, a regionally differentiated process of urban restructuring can be expected in the near future. This restructuring will affect both inner cities and urban peripheries. Even if urban shrinking should contribute to the further stagnation of suburbanisation (as a process), ‘suburbia’ or “Zwischenstadt” as a spatial category will remain in existence and not disappear. This also means that this spatial category must be considered in planning efforts, either by an improvement in existing structures and an ‘orderly retreat’ in the context of stagnation and shrinking, or in the sense of prospective planning in growing urban regions. An adequate characterisation of suburbia is still missing in the German discussion. Many labels attached to suburban developments contain explicit criticisms of unwanted developments, like “Amerikanisierung,” “Zersiedelung,” or ‘urban sprawl’. They are not suitable to describe suburbanisation in Europe or to predict uncertain future patterns of development.⁶³ According to conventional thinking and related discourse in policy and planning, the general goal of reducing the consumption of space appears to be undisputed. However, complaints about ‘urban sprawl’ or “Zersiedelung” tend to ignore the fact that the issue is much more complex than is often suggested. Critical assessments of suburbanization, for instance, are often determined by urban boundaries, thus criticizing development beyond city limits, and superseding similar impacts within the boundary. Also, suburbia as the spatial frame is made responsible for certain effects that are mainly derived from individual perception and behaviour. Finally, suburban and exurban settlements represent a significant part of the metropolitan landscape, so they should indeed no longer be ignored. It appears that the periodically hegemonic discourse on “sprawl” is an outcome of social construction, rather than being based on material evidence and convincing arguments.⁶⁴ Consequently, if suburbanisation is to be better understood than before, it also requires the development of a diversified inventory of terms which takes into consideration both the changing, non-linear process of suburbanisation and its differentiated product ‘suburbia’.

⁶³ Brueckner (2000); Peiser (2001)

⁶⁴ Hesse/Kaltenbrunner (2005)

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