



## **Suburbanization as a Project**

**Martin Vanier**

*Experts and policies fail to recognize the contradictions that urban sprawl creates and rarely go beyond directives. Perhaps the right questions aren't being asked. Rather than calling to limit the growth of these territories, thought of as being "without qualities," Martin Vanier pleads for a suburban project.*

For the past forty years, society has become more and more suburbanized. For the past forty years, scientific observers have described and explained the problem of suburbanization. And, for the past forty years, solutions put in place to counter suburbanization have been failing. In France, a European country with relatively low density, small properties and hyper-local land-use management, conditions remain, more than ever, favorable to sprawl.

Action taken by researchers in the so-called hard sciences (physicists, climatologists, ecologists), which warn of global change (energy, climate, biodiversity), strongly resembles the "last combat": the so-called post-carbon, livable city will either be compact or it won't be at all. Urban sprawl – the most unacceptable version of suburbanization – should stop immediately.

### **Directives Do Little to Advance the Debate**

While suburbanization is taking place at the global level, the dominant discourse continues to affirm the same strong opinions. The social sciences, however, have shown that the social processes in which knowledge originates find meaning only in the contradictions that they create. To go towards a solution, we first have to frame the problem. Judging by the difficulty in advancing the debate, the question of suburbanization remains poorly framed.

Even regarding sustainable development, there is still a long way to go. Will the systemic limits that constrain mobility redensify urban societies or will they lead to new solutions? Economic and societal technological innovations that allow us to move around are potentially numerous: more expensive energy but engines that consume less; more limited long-distance trips but more numerous local movements; more efficient mass transportation solutions, but even more multimodal and varied individual trips. In the end, should we redensify or reorganize density?

The question of the relationship to natural and cultivated areas is also complex. Will global food demand warrant developing industrial agricultural areas, or will the demands of inhabitants for local produce lead them to live as close as possible to the farm? Can we entrust the forest, growing like never before in France, to save biodiversity, or should we instead count on the inhabitants as the environmentally conscious gardeners of a "third-landscape?" In the end, will we move towards a stricter separation between the built space of cities and the open spaces of agriculture, or to the contrary, toward their intentional intertwinement?

## **Taking Responsibility for Suburbanization and Reinvesting in its Territories**

The suburbanization currently taking place in France and Europe has diverse possibilities. It is at the heart of metropolization because it is coextensive with the territory, using Yves Chalas' expression.<sup>1</sup> Thus, isn't there a way out of suburbanization as a problem and rather than face of a sort of "under-city" unfortunately built on the outskirts for lack of collective vigilance, go towards suburbanization as a project, which would contribute to an integrated thinking of the city and its territories

"Suburbanization Project:" imagine how this expression must leave aghast those who for the last twenty years, after every population census, believed that they would announce the beginning of the end of suburbanization. How can an urban form of settlement, thought of as the least environmentally viable and the most socially segregated, be worthy of a project? Precisely by ceasing to think about it like it is irrelevant in the urban field, disqualified by its own existence, unworthy of public policy except for the one that would stop it. What is often so hopeless about the suburbs is not their mere existence: there are also city neighborhoods or parts of the countryside, which also blatantly lack qualities. What is hopeless is the absence of a project for these territories, a sort of tacit forsaking taking place in the metropolitan area, in spite of the reality.

### **Inventing the City of Tomorrow in the Suburbs**

Reintegrating the suburbs into the dynamics of the metropolitan area doesn't mean that everything on the outskirts of cities and between them is acceptable. It would allow to make a project out of a problem, precisely because of the constraints that affect the whole urban system today. It would open up new questions, three of which would frame the project.

- The question of the hybridization of amenities or goods, which this in-between situation produces. The intentionally designed mingling of land uses, of functions, and more generally of frames of reference used by diverse actors would make these territories original. The famous "city in the countryside" expresses this aspiration, but the response has been too individualistic and without a collective project. Wanting to live close to nature but also be near services, enjoying a good environment but also having access to jobs, obviously creates contradictions. These contradictions are at the heart of all urban projects, here and elsewhere, but they benefit from the energy coming from the encounter between rural and urban.
- The question of open public space, which is one of these new hybrids that helps overcome old conflicts of representation. Whether we call it blue and green ways, natural infrastructure or open space, it can play the same role as the streets and squares of the "real city" towards positive sub-urbanity. The means to avoid the hopelessness of roundabouts and other road designs always promoted in the name of car safety. It is by appropriating nature, and not these road designs, that we will build the public suburban space of tomorrow.
- The question of the transactional economy could guide relations between centers and the outskirts. If we admit that sustainable development rests on their interdependency, development and access to resources will go hand-in-hand, whereas they have been pitted against each other as different territorial forms. The suburbanization project would emerge from the exchange of collective interests through which the whole metropolis would benefit from its diversely dense areas.

Reclaiming the suburban question and integrating it into the metropolitan question is the condition to overcome the conceptual and political deadlock that we are trudging in today. Suburbanization is not going to disappear, thus it needs to be reinvented. And on its way, change its name...

---

1 Yves Chalas. 2000. *L'invention de la ville*, Paris: Economica.

**Martin Vanier**, geographer, is a professor at the *Institut de Géographie Alpine de l'Université Joseph Fournier- Grenoble I*. His research focuses on metropolization, land planning and policy.

**To quote this article:**

Martin Vanier, « Suburbanization as a Project », *Metropolitics*, 6 April 2011. URL : <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Suburbanization-as-a-Project.html>