

A new kind of suburbia: reflections for future practice and thinking

Metropolitan Workshop have been thinking critically about how innovative forms of suburban housing and neighbourhoods can enhance sociability and liveability since its inception in 2005. So they launched their practice-based research programme, selecting suburbia as their first theme writes Elanor Warwick

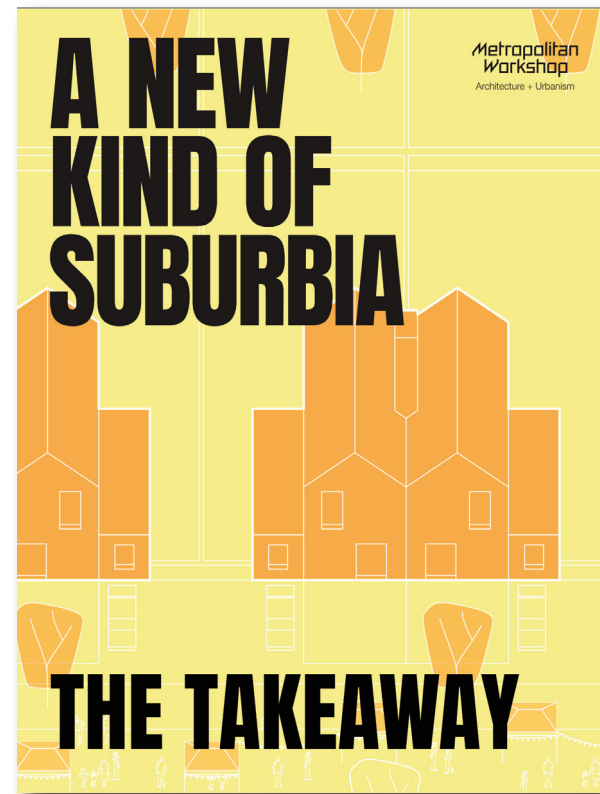
At Metropolitan Workshop, we have been thinking critically about how innovative forms of suburban housing and neighbourhoods can enhance sociability and liveability since our inception in 2005. So, when we launched our practice-based research programme, selecting suburbia as our first research theme felt like a natural point of departure.

We cannot claim to be a successful society until better access to quality housing is available to all. Housing plays a central role in providing equality of opportunity and is part of leveling the playing field for all aspects of life. However, the twentieth century model of suburbia no longer serves the socio-economic and cultural challenges confronting people, in terms of type, tenure and environmental impact. There is a need for A New Kind of Suburbia, one that better supports community and promotes new forms of tenure, is affordable, durable and provides for diversity.

The thinking for our ongoing exploration - A New Kind of Suburbia (ANKoS)¹ - builds on the legacy from leaders in the field, our friends and mentors; most notably David Prichard and our former mentor and colleague the late Sir Richard MacCormac. Lifelong interest in designing convivial housing from Milton Keynes to Brixton and their proposals for Sustainable Suburbia² informed our response to the interplay between density and community evidenced in our competition winning dial-a-density proposal for the RIBA/ Wates 2013 ideas competition³ and the subsequent development of our concept for the suburban Homestead.

Thoughtful responses to suburbia are in our DNA. Recent projects, including Oakfield in Swindon for the Nationwide Building Society, address what sociable, socially equitable models of suburbia might be like. There are a growing number of good examples of suburban housing models to learn from. But there are not enough of these to see the innovation required for suburbia to realise its full social potential. Now is the time to review and update the concept that the UK first invented.

Our A New Kind of Suburbia exhibition and event series launched in May 2019 and was attended by over 100 practitioners, with many more members of the public visiting the exhibition during Clerkenwell Design Week and the London Festival of Architecture Studio Lates. Our initial thoughts and those of collaborators were captured within the accompanying Prospects #01 Paper including literature and case studies on suburbia with contributions by practitioners, including Levitt Bernstein; ZCD Architects; Studio Partington; Sarah Wigglesworth Architects and Proctor Matthews Architects. Contributions by colleagues, included reflections on past and ongoing suburban projects and their formative experiences of



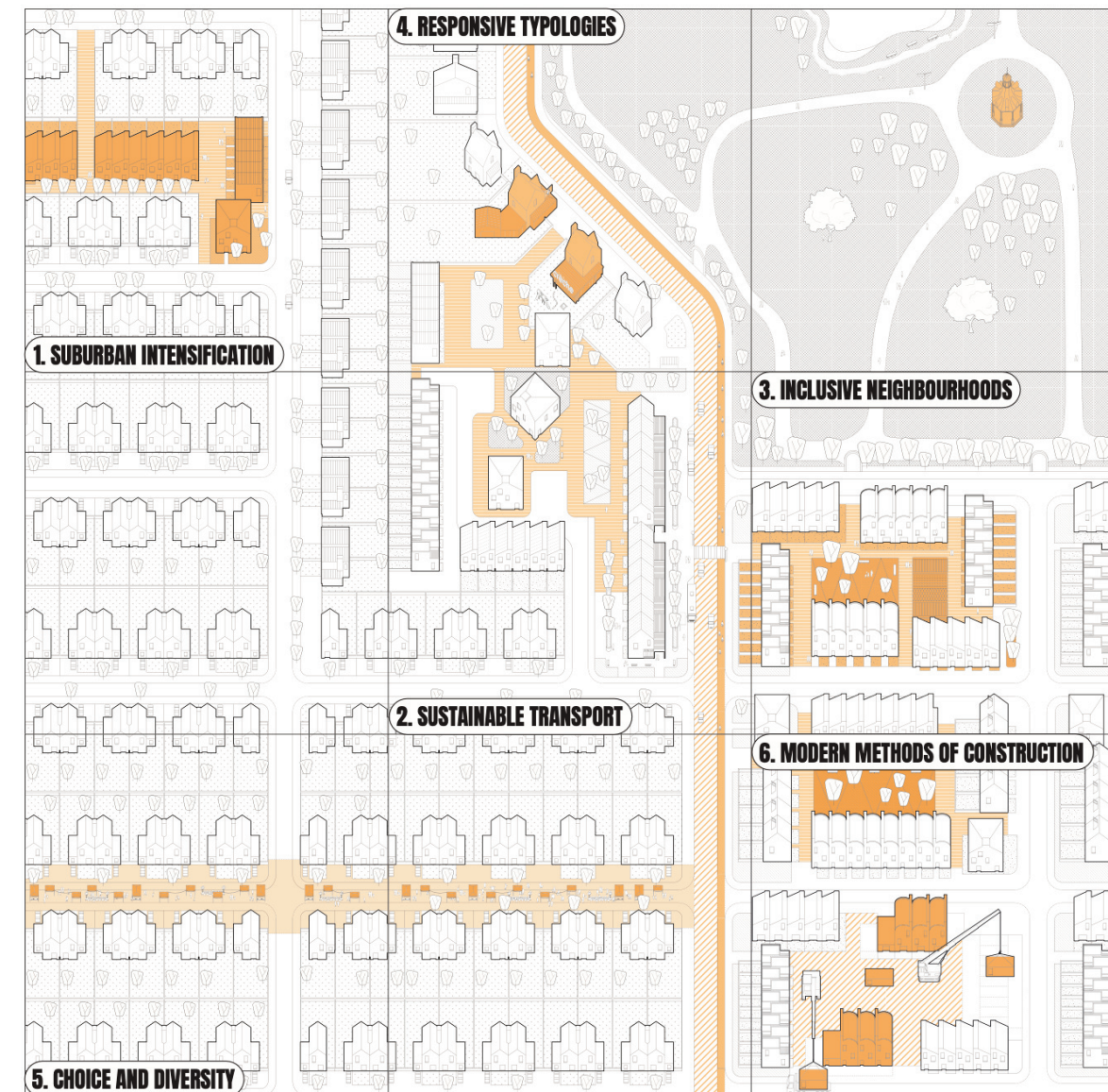
suburbia.

Exemplar projects on suburban development grounded provocations set within the paper and by practitioners during the exhibition launch, as well as stimulating questions from architects, developers, planners, community advocates and housing practitioners.

The resultant rich material (all available online) provided prompts for a collective conversation to draw out key themes and dig deeper into areas of consensus or conflict. A roundtable sought to develop a new thinking on suburban design, development, construction and management practices, by capturing perspectives of contemporary practitioners in architecture, housing and community participation. The discussion aimed to enrich ours and others' practice by generating productive trajectories for practice development and ideas for design research. The resultant *Reflections for Future Practice and Thinking*⁴ concludes on the challenges identified and provides an agenda for further exploration into the future design, development, construction and use of suburban places.

A New Kind of Suburbia has also been reconsidered by our Dublin Studio for Ireland, demonstrating the transferability of the concepts and was launched in October 2019.

Somewhere in suburbia, sometime in the future...



Recommendations for Future Practice (and Research) for Suburban Development

The Takeaway⁵

Several recurrent themes emerged from the critical discussion that followed the ANKoS events. Some issues are more relevant to remaking existing places, some impact the planning of new suburbs and some, common to both, require multiple solutions. We have drawn a series of questions for consideration by practitioners who have spoken to us so thoughtfully and fondly about their suburban experiences and hopes for the future.

The recommendations recognise the historical drivers that shaped suburbia, and their changing function and context. They address six key areas; how future suburbs might look and feel, what are the most effective ways to move around them, what activities they need to contain, how socially interactive communities might be encouraged and perhaps most importantly, who

will engage in the decision-making and delivery of these new places?

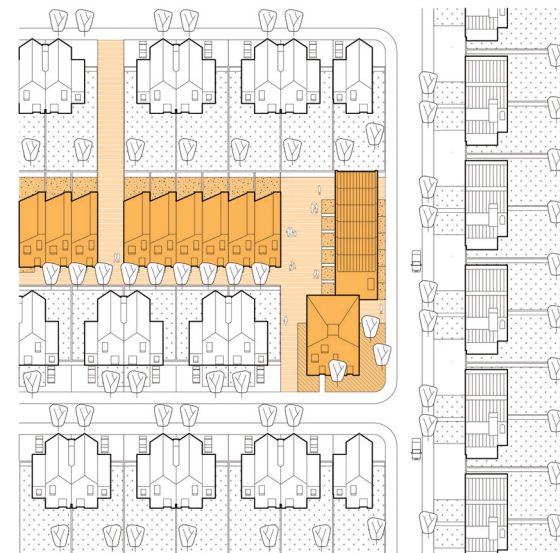
1. Suburban Intensification

How will future suburbs be shaped?

New Designs should explore how a new suburban model can support incremental "gentle" intensification and integration of communal facilities. Collaboration with housing associations would provide a valuable means of testing assumptions against development and asset management practice. The ten characteristics for well-designed places described in DLUHC's National Design Guidance⁶ maps directly across to the ambitions described in the ANKoS report. Suburbia isn't homogeneous, and more explorative work is needed to ensure the guidance and National Design Code⁷ is applied in ways that are varied and sensitive to suburban issues.

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RIGHT:
Suburban Intensification



>>> 2. Sustainable Transport

Finding better ways of moving in the suburbs.

Designers and development clients should work together to discuss upfront investment in alternative transport infrastructure (where scale permits). Designers should also collaborate with transport engineers on integrated alternative transport plans, exploring and anticipating expected shifts in transport usages and modes.

Nevertheless, in regions with poorer public transport networks, car use will remain a reality, so mitigating strategies such as better integration of car parking and charging points into the public realm, or future proofing conversion of current car parking space for other communal activities will be required.

3. Inclusive Neighbourhoods

What you share, and who with?

There is social potential in the open, semi-public space offered by Metropolitan Workshop's Homestead seen in established projects such as Abode at Great Kneighton, Derwenthorpe, York, or the new suburbs emerging at Barking Riverside or Trumpington and Waterbeach around Cambridge. Yet, discussions revealed the challenges of avoiding prohibitive costs associated with service charges and also the potential for existing mechanisms of community-led volunteering being a burden. Developing a flexible model for community-led management and maintenance of communal land, based on the notional activities offered by the Homestead (a cost per sqm of communal land as approximate capital cost and maintenance fee to be offset by volunteer contributions) would provide an indicative set of principles to be tested. Collaboration with a developing housing association or institutional investor could test these assumptions and refine the model against their practice expertise.

4. Responsive Typologies

Providing space for changing needs and activities.

Lower suburban land values used to imply an economic decision or trade-off between more space (particularly external space) against longer commutes. But increasing costs and intensification risk reducing this available suburban slack space. Changing expectations for household space will shift the incentive to move further afield for additional rooms and space. Familiar semi-detached, or detached typologies can be designed to suit more varied mixed households, intergenerational living, co-living arrangements and work space⁶. During the design process actively testing internal layouts against the needs and aspirations of key life stages, with a specific focus on promoting health and well-being of the young, old and those with medical conditions offers resilience against different future scenarios. Improving housing adaptability

improves social and spatial justice as well as sustainability.

5. Choice and Diversity

Who gets a say in how suburbia is developed?

From the most-to-least planned places, increasing public engagement in design and planning has proven benefits for attractiveness and social sustainability. It is still worth exploring the extent to which the suburbs are designed for or by their inhabitants to a directed vision or are left to organically evolve within a loose framework of agreed rules. These guidelines must extend beyond the aesthetic and range in scale from neighbourhood plans to local design codes.

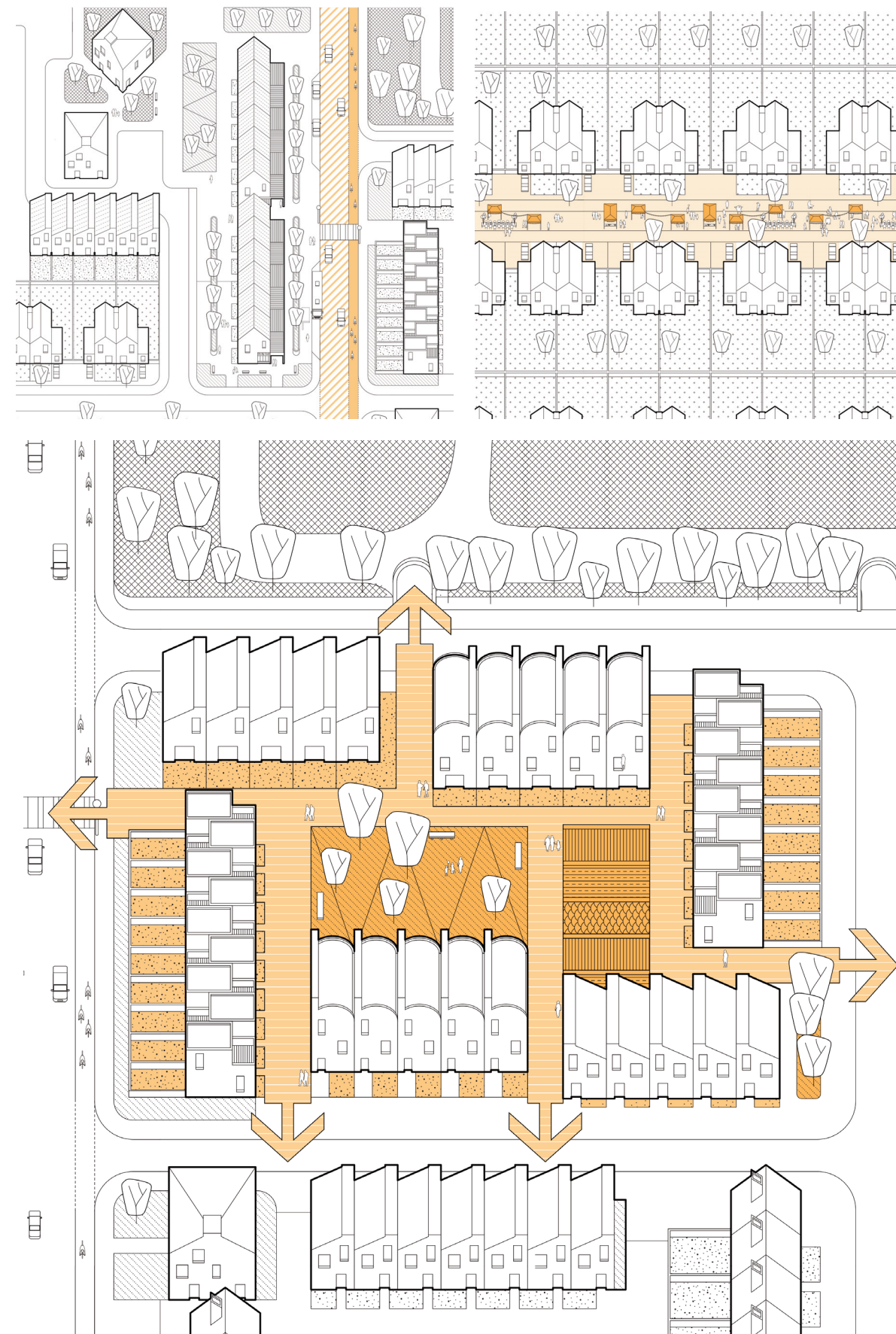
6. The role of the builder

Who will be building suburbia and how?

An holistic approach to residential modelling will become more critical in the short term. As house prices rise, affordability tightens, the number of households in the suburbs grow, and negative trends in social mobility, deprivation and poverty are rapidly escalating, all challenging the long-term prospects of outer boroughs. Calls for a suburban renaissance covering these economic, sustainability and social issues are increasing and if suburbs are not to become a problem, we need to apply preventative design thinking, including proactive responses to the climate emergency. Anticipating the energy performance and Net Zero emissions construction requirements of the Future Homes Standard, but also suburbia's potential for low-impact lifestyles, design criteria can be developed for suburbs where it is easy and convenient to make sustainable choices. ■

FOOTNOTES

- 1 <https://metwork.co.uk/research/a-new-kind-of-suburbia/>
- 2 <http://mjparchitects.co.uk/about/publications/sustainable-suburbia/>
- 3 <https://metwork.co.uk/work/wates-riba-private-rented-sector-ideas-competition/>
- 4 https://issuu.com/metropolitanworkshop/docs/mw_project_paper_insert
- 5 https://issuu.com/metropolitanworkshop/docs/mw_prospects_01_ankos_the_takeaway_spreads
- 6 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide>
- 7 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-model-design-code>
- 8 See papers in the special edition of *Buildings and Cities Journal* that explores changing trends in dwelling, particularly the new patterns of spatial and social cohabitation prompted by the COVID pandemic <https://journal-buildingsciences.org/articles/10.5334/bc.266/>



FAR LEFT:
Sustainable Transport

LEFT:
Choice and Diversity

BELOW:
Inclusive Neighbourhoods