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Emerging Post-Suburban Blendscapes in Metropolitan Milan and Amsterdam: Comparing Pioltello and Almere

LORENZO DE VIDOVICH and YANNIS TZANINIS

European peripheries and suburbs are generally seen by scholars and policy experts as part of a polycentric urban-regional network. This conceptually 'cityist' and methodologically 'urbano-centric' narrative often neglects the dynamics that may emanate from and within the periphery itself instead of cities alone. This paper engages with the history, possibilities, and transformative potential of European urban peripheries in their own right. It does this by employing the idea of 'post-suburbia'. On the one hand, the concept of 'post-suburbia' is relatively open and flexible, thus helpful in disclosing novel peripheral conditions and contexts. On the other hand, it captures the relevant places and dynamics of metropolitan integration and the consolidation of regional networks in metropolitan space. First, the paper demonstrates how post-World War II European suburbanization has culminated in diverse, uneven post-suburban landscapes in the urban regions of Milan and Amsterdam, and specifically in Pioltello and Almere respectively. Second, the paper shows the nuances of socio-spatial transformations that have emerged in these two suburban peripheries, as an outcome of suburbanization. This twofold reflection enables post-suburbia as a valuable perspective that can unpack the diversities and complexities of urban regions under constant transformation by accounting for processes of diversification resulting in suburban 'blendscapes'.

European peripheries and suburbs are generally seen by scholars and policy experts as parts of a polycentric urban-regional network. Polycentricity typifies settlements within a region as places with different roles and functions, such as centres of culture, finance or politics (Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001; Salet, 2006; Vasanen, 2012; Burger *et al.*, 2014). Although the concept has been criticized by scholars regarding its normative use as a 'pacifying spatial imaginary' (Granqvist *et al.*, 2019), as well as its (lack of) accuracy when describing the urban periphery (Tzaninis and Boterman, 2018), it remains a dominant paradigm in the analysis and comprehension of metropolitan Europe (Dembski *et al.*, 2021; Meijers *et al.*, 2018). In the spirit of this special issue, this paper argues that such conceptually 'cityist' and methodologically 'urbano-centric' narratives commonly neglect the dynamics that may emanate from and within the periphery. The paper engages with the history, possibilities and transformative potential of European urban peripheries, by employing the concept of post-suburbia (Phelps *et al.*, 2006; 2010).

The paper draws on extensive research on the cases of Pioltello, located at the eastern edges of Milan (Italy), and Almere,

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to the east of Amsterdam (Netherlands). A comparative case study approach facilitates theory-building aimed at embracing diversities of post-(sub)urban experiences (Lijphart, 1971; Robinson, 2011). In this respect, De Vidovich (2022*a*) describes post-suburbia as a theoretical tool that enables one to navigate 'from global to local' with a particular reference to those urban outskirts that were overshadowed until the beginning of the twenty-first century. Metropolitan Milan and Amsterdam are two regions with some strong similarities. Both cities are considered cultural hubs and international centres. They are culturally diverse regions with around 20 per cent and 17 per cent respectively of their residents being foreign-born.[1] This compares with around 10 per cent and 11 per cent nationally in Italy and the Netherlands respectively. Both cities' central areas have experienced rapid and large-scale gentrification that has amplified housing affordability and cost of living problems (Arundel and Hochstenbach, 2020). This paper approaches metropolization processes from the vantage point of Pioltello and Almere. Although both areas are quite distinct in the sense that Pioltello is a pre-World War II settlement while Almere was built in the 1970s, both areas were impacted by post-World War II sub/urbanization processes. Pioltello's population doubled in size during the 1960s as part of Italy's urban transformation, while Almere was the outcome of a major suburbanization drive in post-World War II Netherlands that culminated in the establishment of many satellite towns around larger cities (Tzaninis and Boterman, 2018). Furthermore, they are both connected economically and culturally to their respective main cities but remain distinct municipalities and economically active places. The two places have diverse populations in terms of nationality and ethnic background and are reminiscent of post-suburban cosmopolitanism (Tzaninis, 2020). Pioltello and Almere can be viewed as global post-suburbs, 'kaleidoscopic' (Tzaninis, 2016), cosmopolitan, super-diverse, but also 'ordinary' (Robinson, 2005) and suburban. The following sections of the paper first explain the theoretical framework, before recounting the cases in Milan and Amsterdam and concluding with some key takeaways.

Post-Suburbia: A Theoretical Framework for a Diversified Landscape

Questioning the 'Urbano-Centric' Perspective

Over the past four decades, the idea that we live in an 'urban age' (Burdett and Sudjic, 2007, 2011) has characterized both policy and academic discourses. Yet, the so-called 'urban age' has been criticized as being *empirically untenable* (i.e. a statistical artifact) and *theoretically incoherent* (i.e. a chaotic conception) (Brenner and Schmid, 2014). In a nutshell, the notion of the urban age has at its core the movement of populations from more dispersed, largely rural environments to denser urban ones where humans allegedly seek a large variety of possibilities to increase their wellbeing. The notion of 'urban age' became commonplace and galvanized the centrality of the urban in public debate as 'a *de rigueur* framing device or reference point for nearly anyone concerned to justify the importance of cities as sites of research, policy intervention, planning/design practice, investment or community activism' (Brenner and Schmid, 2015, p. 734). Furthermore, this notion reinforced traditionally prevalent centre–periphery, urban–rural, dense–dispersed dualisms, where the city is conceived as a core and the suburbs as peripheral socio-spatialities. As suggested by Keil (2017*a*, p. 191) 'the dense-city versus dispersed-suburbs trope has been an ideal carrier of the urbanist differentiation of form and function: it became the ideal battle ground for ideas of human life that are entirely unrelated to how we are housed, sheltered and moved around'. In this sense, then, it is necessary to overcome the analytical biases that direct attention exclusively or primarily to the city.

Critiques of declarations of an urban age enable a redefinition of *the urban*, albeit they do not question the 'urban revolution' hypothesized by Henri Lefebvre ([1970] 2003). Rather, they underpin a general unease with the stable categories of space and society (Hamel and Keil, 2015). Drawing on Lefebvre, Walks (2013) stresses the role of urbanism as a product of the social power from which both state and market rationality arise, as well as the centrality of decision-making, and not only as a complete subordination of the agrarian to the urban. In other words, as Keil (2017*b*) again argues, when Lefevbre postulated the idea of 'right to the city' he did not endorse the fetishization of decision-making centres (Lefebvre, [1970] 2003). Rather, he unfolded the subordination of the peripheries in the late Fordist era, when suburbs were constantly growing despite the city operating primarily through its centres as places of productivity.

However, this is no longer today's reality. According to Lefebvre, a socio-spatial dialectic influences the 'urban', while the urban revolution paved the way for an extension of urban morphology through its dislocation, producing suburbs engulfed by the urban core, thus extending the city far beyond its physical borders (Lefebvre, 1967; 2003). Understanding contemporary suburbanization necessitates navigating the relations between agglomeration processes and their operational landscapes, including land-use intensification and infrastructural expansion, socio-metabolic transformations, and territorial redesign, at all spatial scales, through diverse sub-regional politics (Schafran, 2014). Nonetheless, the attention that suburbanization has and continues to gain in the debate about land transformation is not always strengthened by a focus on suburbs, which remain under the shadow of an 'urbano-centric' approach to metropolitanism. This standpoint, Tzaninis argues (2020, p. 144), observes the non-urban realm simply as 'an empty field, as an indeterminate outside that serves to demarcate the urban condition from its purportedly exurban or rural "other"' while focusing mainly on 'agglomerations' and 'densely settled zones' (Brenner and Schmid, 2014, p. 20). Instead, urbanization involves not only concentration but also 'extensions' and the relevant forms of 'extended urbanization' (Monte-Mor, 2014; Castriota and Tonucci, 2018), which build a strong interplay between capitalism and the urban realm.

Against this background, a post-suburban view entails an 'un-city' perspective (Tzaninis, 2020) that simultaneously calls for approaches that overcome the city/suburb dichotomy, which, in turn, become a commonplace distinction between densely populated urban neighbourhoods and sprawling low-density single-family dwellings. Traditional models that differentiate spaces into urban-rural no longer reflect current urban forms which have been labelled the 'in-between city' (Sieverts, 2003; 2011) or 'interplaces' (Phelps, 2017) to describe 'rurban' places and which manifest divergent conditions of wealth and poverty, growth and decline, inclusion and exclusion, centre and periphery at all spatial scales (Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Filion and Keil, 2016). And, as Maginn and Phelps note, given the thematic focus of this issue of *Built Environment*, metropolitan regions are increasingly defined by (sub)urban blendscapes. That is, (sub)urban spaces that exhibit, to varying and dynamic degrees, a blend of urban and suburban characteristics.

The advancement of critical research on the centrality of the urban as an unavoidable analytical category has been prompted by the fact that the majority of urban or metropolitan growth has been predominantly 'suburban' (Keil, 2017*a*; Maginn and Anacker, 2022). This provides an opportunity to move beyond the 'urbano-centricism' within urban studies and use the notion of 'post-suburban Europe': not as mere factual reflection of contemporary Europe, but rather as a critical standpoint to grasp the complexity of sub-urbanization processes (and the relevant outcomes) in the 'old continent'.

Post-Suburbia in the Twenty-First Century

In the contemporary urban age, the majority of the world's population is actually suburban in location (Phelps, 2021) directing attention to processes by which city regions have been turned inside out (Soja, 2000). A plethora of perspectives have considered how urban theories apply differently across metropolitan areas, not only in order to focus on the conceptual and governmental construction of a 'metropolitan space' (Fricke and Gualini, 2018; Gross *et. al.*, 2019), but also to depict diverse suburban peculiarities. Such diversification is apparent at a range of scales including between the Global North and Global South and within each continent. Europe, for instance, presents a diverse landscape of urban peripheries produced by path-dependencies and planning trajectories embedded in the modern history of each nation (Tzaninis and De Vidovich, forthcoming). Phelps (2017) has shown how 'old' Europe has been overlain by a 'new' process of suburbanization throughout the twentieth century. Although some common features can be identified, such as those encompassing post-socialist countries (Stanilov and Sýkora, 2014; Hirt and Kovachev, 2015; Lokšová and Batista, 2021), distinct forms, features, functions, and times characterize the ways in which suburbanization has proceeded within Europe.

In recent decades, a European 'post-suburbia' landscape has slowly emerged and partially followed trends similar to those in North America, the UK, and Australia, the so-called birthplaces of modern suburbia (Nijman and Clery, 2015). Yet, post-suburbia landscapes in Western Europe tend to be of a more modest scale and inter-connected with the traditional cores of city-regions (Bontje and Burdack, 2011). In overall terms, European cities have not developed along low-density and automobile-dependent patterns (Couch *et al.*, 2008; Phelps, 2017; Phelps and Parsons, 2003). Rather, they have a more 'compact' morphology, especially within historic urban cores that long pre-date the emergence of modern transport systems (De Vidovich, 2020). In general, the image of a compact and mixed city, both regarding social groups and functions, is a fundamental feature of the identity and culture of many European cities (Harlander and Kuhn, 2012; Raco, 2018). This is in contrast to their North American counterparts, which are seen and planned as sprawled 'edgeless' cities (Lang and LeFurgy, 2003). However, European cities and metropolitan nodes have been incrementally transforming and now exhibit elements of archetypal North American low-density suburbanisms and the polynucleated landscape of mid-sized towns, big cities, and high-rise peripheral areas (De Vidovich, 2020).

The term post-suburbia encompasses a profusion of terms to describe urban edges (De Vidovich, 2019) and can help account for the heterogeneity of suburban forms emerging within and across metropolitan regions. It is especially helpful in highlighting how suburbanization operates at a range of scales, characterized by a variety of elements, and manifests under diverse site-specific economic, demographic, geographical, institutional and cultural conditions (Pagliarin and De Decker, 2018). In other words, 'post-suburbia' has paved the way for a broader understanding of suburbs beyond the mono-functional North American model (Phelps *et al.*, 2006; 2010; Phelps and Wood, 2011) and potentially beyond the polycentric European model (Dembski *et al.*, 2021). In this respect, 'post-suburbia' has been used to distinguish a new era of urbanization (Phelps and Wu, 2011), one that resonates with post-Fordism. In particular, 'in the post-suburban era of the early twenty-first century, traditional notions of urban and suburban no longer were relevant' (Teaford, 2011, p. 29). Although a precise or conclusive definition of post-suburbia remains contested, it remains useful in identifying conceptual, political and governance issues in diversified areas (Phelps *et al.*, 2010).

The Mixed and Cosmopolitan Complexity of Post-Suburbia

Insofar as post-suburbia entails a focus on diversification, it also raises the social and spatial complexity that characterizes suburbs worldwide, especially considering that contemporary post-suburbia is characterized by divergent conditions of wealth and poverty, growth and decline, inclusion and exclusion, centre and periphery (Filion and Keil, 2016). Simply put, post-suburbia landscapes do not conform to the stereotypical socio-economic and racial/ethnic exclusivity associated with the North American suburban model which may be defined as a (sub) urban blandscape (see Maginn and Phelps in this issue).

While the built environment of European post-suburbia is characterized by displays of a combination of low-density and a polynucleated landscape of small towns and high-rise peripheral areas (De Vidovich, 2020), the social fabric is also highly heterogeneous, resulting in a cosmopolitan post-suburban population. Therefore, post-suburbia in Europe invokes pluralism and diversity in spatial, morphological, demographic, and political terms. Recent urban and social studies dedicated to 'cosmopolitanism' provide an analytical 'grip' on the social realities of contemporary sub-urbanization in relation to difference and diversity (Millington, 2016). This interplay evokes the social diversity that characterizes many contemporary peripheries and suburban areas and is captured by the notion of 'ethnoburbs' (Li, 1998). Strictly speaking, ethnoburb refers to the concentration of a specific ethnic/cultural group in a suburb such as Chinese suburbs in Los Angeles or the (former) Italian suburbs in northern Toronto. Although ethnoburbs can be found in Europe the heterogeneity of ethnicities within European post-suburbia landscapes represents a key point of divergence with the Anglo-American ethnoburb.

Since international migration processes have always been a pivotal driver of urbanization (Cremaschi, 2016), urban peripheries are increasingly multicultural spaces (Kling *et al.*, 1995). Hence to understand the lived experiences of migrant communities within a European context the analytical gaze should be on everyday suburbanisms (Tzaninis, 2020). The two case studies at the centre of this paper exemplify the diversity of European post-suburbia and mark them out as 'arrival spaces' (Saunders, 2011) for different migrant communities. Furthermore, when different migrant communities coexist in the same suburbs because of differentiated arrival processes (Collins, 2018), this gives rise to challenges in terms of public policy action along temporal, territorial, and placemaking dimensions.

As new migrant communities move into and grow in size within suburban environments this can lead to a reshaping and/or redefining of the use of public spaces through grassroots practices aimed at (re)creating a sense of togetherness and liveability. Therefore, in terms of post-suburban politics and policy *vis-à-vis* welfare provision and rights to the city, political and policy institutions need to recognize and respond to the needs and aspirations of emerging and expanding culturally diverse suburban constituencies (see Phelps *et al.*, 2015). In other words, pluralism needs to be at the forefront of public policy agendas. The cosmopolitan complexity of European post-suburbia in terms of social and cultural heterogeneity are considered via a comparative analysis of Pioltello in Milan, Italy and Almere in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Multicultural Post-Suburban Change in Metropolitan Milan: The Case of Pioltello

The urbanization of Italy is a complex phenomenon. Urbanization accelerated after the Second World War and was underpinned by several key inter-related factors: (*i*) industrialization; (*ii*) rural-to-urban and South-to-North migration flows; and (*iii*) infra-

structural development that engulfed numerous small and mid-sized towns in emerging city-regions. Metropolization in Italy is confined to just three urban nodes – Milan, Rome, and Naples – and the form of metropolitanism differs across all three cities (De Vidovich, 2022*b*).

In the early 1950s, Italy was still a largely rural country with a small number of 'compact' cities that had yet to be transformed by urbanization and the post-World War I industrial boom that spread across Europe. As urban expansion took root, physical growth and urban morphology was shaped by the territorial pattern of roads, valleys and water supply networks (Lanzani *et al*., 2015). The urbanization of Italy has only marginally exhibited the typical (sub) urban patterns associated with Anglo-Saxon sprawl (Lanzani, 2003; 2012). The form of urbanization in Italy is captured by the term *urbanizzazione diffusa,* which refers to scattered and differently sized towns (Indovina *et al.*, 1990; 2009; Fregolent, 2005). Milan may be viewed as a quintessential representation of *urban* Italy.

Following a period of de-industrialization and dramatic fall in population, Milan has emerged as a global city (Magatti, 2005). This global city status is a result of several urban transformations and large-scale projects dating back to the beginning of the twenty-first century (Anselmi and Vicari, 2019; Conte and Anselmi, 2022). In theoretical terms, analyses of the growth of Milan have been via two primary lenses: (*i*) metropolization (Pastori *et al*., 1987; Bonomi and Abruzzese, 2004); and (*ii*) regionalization (Ardigò, 1967; Lanzani, 1991; 2005; Balducci, 2004; Balducci *et al*., 2017*a*). A nation-wide analysis of urbanization in Italy (Balducci *et al*., 2017a) [2] using a regional urbanization framework (Soja, 2011) identified three core elements that have defined the regional urbanization process in Milan:

- A geophysical North–South divide: to the North the highly urbanized and industrialized area called 'Brianza' separates the urban from the Alpine area, whereas to the South the 'greenbelt' of *Parco Agricolo Sud Milano* has resulted in a different form of urbanization;

- A historic polycentric regional structure of neighbouring mid-sized cities has supported the urban and economic growth of the whole metropolitan area; and

- Radio-centric expansion and connections: Milan's spatial centrality and links with other territories has strengthened due to extensive infrastructural development.

The coalescence of these forces has produced thick population densities and urbanization patterns across Milan and neighbouring municipalities. For Balducci *et al*. (2017*b*) Milan represents the quintessential 'post-metropolis' (Soja, 2000). The physical and demographic growth of Milan stimulated the development of metropolitan policy-making framework (Balducci, 2003; Gualini, 2003; Del Fabbro, 2018). The institutionalization of 'Metropolitan City' (*Città Metropolitana*) governance (via Law 56/2014) resulted in the abolition of provinces in a number of Italian cities and enacted a new phase of metropolization. From a socio-spatial viewpoint, and moving from the urban core to the periphery, Balducci *et al*. (2017*b*) identify different patterns of (*i*) emergent urbanity in the in-between areas, (*ii*) social polarization and fragility, and (*iii*) housing heterogeneity. Overall, the in-between spaces are characterized by 'a dense network of municipalities that result in a fragmented pattern of multiple centralities exceeding both radio-centric and polycentric hierarchies' (Balducci *et al*., 2017*b*, p. 38). The suburb of Pioltello falls into this category.

Pioltello is located about 15 km from Milan with a population of 36,147,[3] of which 25 per cent are 'foreigners'. There has been significant expansion since the 1960s with the population increasing from 13,803 to

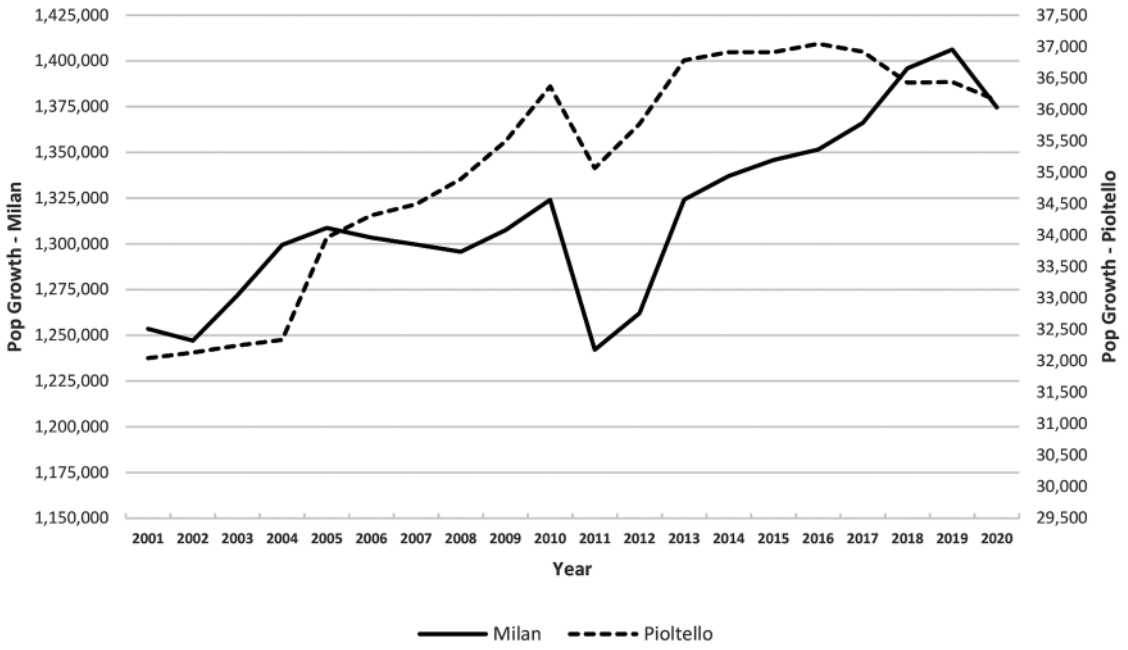

Figure 1. Population growth in Milan and Pioltello (2001–2020). (*Source*: https://demo.istat.it)

28,566 (+107 per cent) between 1961 and 1971. This 10-year period also coincided with industrial expansion in Northern Italy that stimulated migration from the Southern regions to the main urban areas in the north. By the early 2000s Pioltello had become a multicultural town with census data indicating foreign-born residents were from eighty different countries (De Vidovich and Bovo, 2021). Housing affordability was a key driver of why so many migrants moved to Pioletto. In short, population growth in Pioltello followed a broadly similar trend to that of Milan (see figure 1).

The increasingly cosmopolitan or multicultural character of Pioltello is associated with a particular neighbourhood – 'Satellite' (see figure 2). In the early 2000s, the number of foreign-born residents in Pioltello kept growing, reaching 7.9 per cent of the total population in 2003, with the largest concentration in the Satellite neighbourhood (Granata, 2004). As such, Pioltello began to be characterized as an arrival town (Saunders, 2011). So much so that the public administration established specific services and institutions in order to be able to deal with the flow of migrants from several non-European countries. The municipality launched two key welfare services: (*i*) a helpdesk service to support non-EU citizens with bureaucratic issues, such as the acquisition of residence permits; and (*ii*) the Inter-cultural Council (*Consulta interculturale*) that brought together various philanthropic actors involved in helping new migrants adopt and integrate into their new homes and communities. The migrant population grew even more rapidly after 2011 as a result of the political instability within the North Africa region. The migrant population as a share of total population increased from 12 per cent to 24 per cent between 2014 and 2017. Many migrants during this period moved to Satellite due to well-established migratory chains and the availability of informal sublet accommodation. Today, Pioltello is one of the municipalities within the Lombardy

Figure 2. Built environment of Satellite neighbourhood, Pioltello. (*Photo*: Lorenzo De Vidovich)

region with the highest number (~9,000) and share (25 per cent) of foreign-born residents (Di Giovanni and Leveratto, 2018). There are over 100 nationalities represented in Pioltello with Egyptian, Romanian, Pakistani and Ecuadorian the most common groups.

Following the 2007–2008 economic crisis, many immigrants who had moved to Pioltello (and Satellite especially) during the 1990s and early 2000s became unemployed and faced great difficulty in paying their mortgages. The economic crisis had major ripple effects because newly arrived immigrants who became unemployed mostly lived in informal sub-let accommodation – providing migrant homeowners with extra income to help with mortgage repayments – and faced severe housing precarity as many dwellings were repossessed or conditions deteriorated due to a lack of maintenance (Di Giovanni and Leveratto, 2018; De Vidovich and Bovo, 2021).

The local municipality has sought to better govern the fragile cosmopolitanism of Pioltello, with programmes such as *Periferie al centro* which aim to regenerate the Satellite neighbourhood within the wider governmental framework of the Metropolitan City of Milan. This is no easy task for a small local government administration like Pioltello that has found itself, as a key arrival space of global migratory flows, taking the lead in managing cultural diversity and improving peoples' living conditions, especially in Satellite. The adoption of an inter-sectoral approach to dealing with a growing and

diversifying population in Pioltello has led Di Giovanni and Leveratto (2022) to define the area as a 'private-based multicultural periphery' where judicial, social, economic, and cultural tensions overlap. Pioltello has found itself in this position, at least in part, due to Milan deflecting policy responsibility to other smaller administrations within the metropolitan region. De Vidovich and Bovo (2021) refer to this as 'welfare offloading'. Relatedly, although the efforts by Pioltello have been admirable, it lacks the governance and resource capacity to effectively manage a rapidly growing multicultural community with complex and dynamic needs. Ultimately, then, Pioltello may be viewed as an example of a 'blended' post-suburbia. Shifting focus to another cosmopolitan European suburban context (i.e. Almere in the Netherlands) can help better understand what is meant by blended post-suburbia.

A Case from the Urban Region of Amsterdam: the Not-so-New Town Almere

The evolution of twentieth-century urbanity in the Netherlands has followed a trajectory of urbanization-suburbanization-reurbaniza tion. The first wave of urbanization in the Netherlands happened somewhat late and was mainly due to delayed industrialization and a greater focus on international trade (De Vries, 2015). As the Dutch working classes increasingly migrated to cities in the early 1900s, there was a general planning impetus to accommodate these new residents while minimizing sprawl. This type of urbanization persisted until shortly after World War II, when the total Dutch population reached 10 million in 1950, up from 5 million in 1900. The combination of an enlarged urban population plus widespread destruction in many cities due to the war, brought both a drive for pervasive planning policy as well as an increased interest in relocating to the urban peripheries.[4] Planning policies mainly looked to preserve green spaces around big cities while promoting 'concentrated decentralization' (Schwanen *et al.*, 2004). Increased personal mobility brought a wave of domestic migration, in the form of large-scale suburbanization that was interpreted as city decline and polarization between city and periphery, and, thus required a 'remedy' by planners (Hoekstra *et al.*, 2020).

Many settlements were developed in the urban peripheries as 'New Towns'. The overall aim of the First National Spatial Planning Policy in 1960 was polycentric development and growth of the western part of the country (Maas, 2012). These New Towns became synonymous with 'growth cores' (*groeikernen*), urban nuclei that were expected to grow, service and, ultimately, benefit larger cities (Faludi and Van der Valk, 1990). New towns were not planned to be in competition with larger settlements, but it was envisaged they would develop their own moderate economy so as not to be dependent on neighbouring larger cities (Bontje, 2004). The growth of new towns was to be controlled via housing development concentrated in specific areas, in order to prevent sprawl.

Like other Dutch cities during the first half of the twentieth century, Amsterdam's modest industrialization and increased international trade brought an economic boom and, as a consequence, major population growth (Bontje and Sleutjes, 2007). The Dutch capital's population increased by almost 200,000 mainly by annexing outer municipalities and through working-class, domestic migration to the city. Meanwhile, middle- and high-class suburbanization was increasing around Amsterdam. Amsterdam's housing was fashioned to accommodate a large working-class population in higher density housing, while those who could afford to move often chose the suburbs (Terhorst and Van de Ven, 1997). By the early 1960s Fordist industrialization had deepened in the Netherlands, and with it came high employment and mass consumption that brought intense population growth in Amsterdam. In turn, there was a shift in national spatial

planning policy that gave increased emphasis to suburban models of growth. Subsequent waves of suburbanization coincided with the global oil crisis and recession in the early 1970s, which saw Amsterdam's population shrink by 200,000 by the 1980s, while the suburban settlements around it grew considerably and consistently (Musterd *et al.*, 2006), at least until the last decade or so.

The Netherlands is currently experiencing a third wave of domestic migration that has resulted in (re)urbanization and city growth. Such (re)urbanization is, to a large extent, the product of gentrification and neo-liberalization – transformations that have been prevalent in the Netherlands for some time (Van Gent, 2013). Housing in Amsterdam has become increasingly commodified and inaccessible since the mid-1990s (Uitermark, 2009). Although the suburbanization of middle-class families in search of affordable spacious (owner-occupied) housing is still the dominant pattern, the middle-classes have played a large role in the (re)urbanization (Boterman *et al.*, 2010; Hochstenbach and Van Gent, 2015). Figure 3 shows that population growth trends in Amsterdam and the suburban new town of Almere have followed a similar upward trajectory over the last twenty years. Overall, Amsterdam has remained economically successful given its traditional role in trade and finance and due to its 'international position, global connections, a well-developed infrastructure and an increasingly liberal conservative entrepreneurial climate' (Musterd *et al.*, 2020, p. 3).

Almere may be viewed as the quintessential Dutch New Town (see figure 4). That is to say, it was conceived before the land on which it sits even existed and stands as a signifier of Dutch planning and engineering ingenuity having been built on land reclaimed from the sea. Moreover, it also represents a large-scale, social experiment, where the expectations and predictions of its urban trajectory were set well in advance. The plan for Almere in the 1970s

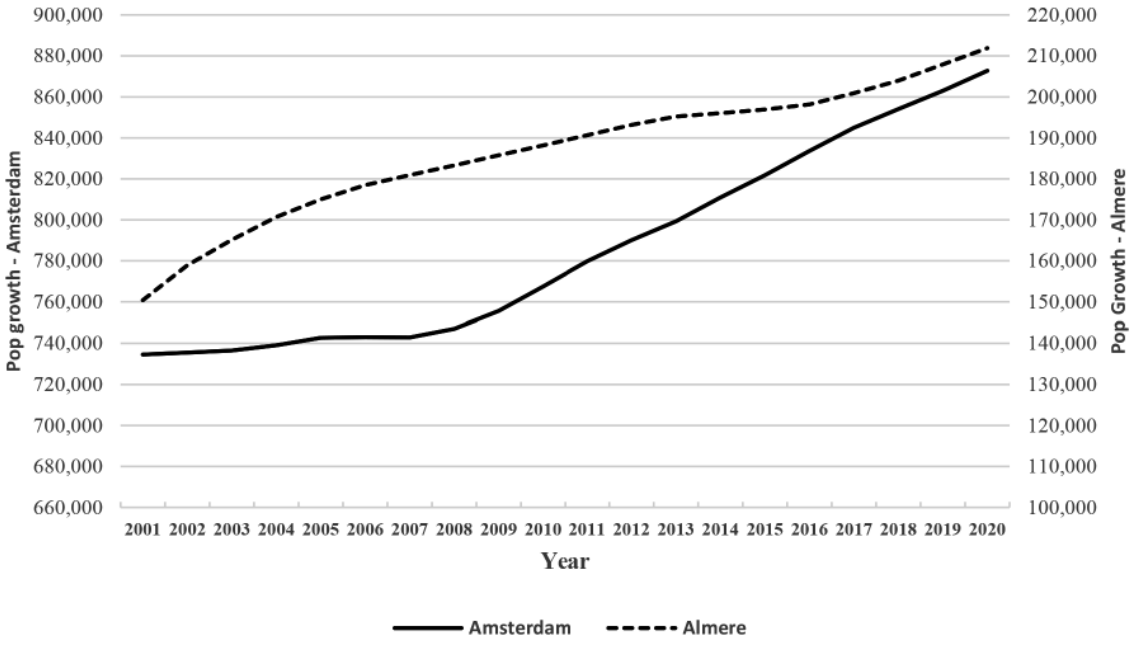

Figure 3. Population growth in Amsterdam and Almere, 2001–2020. (*Source*: CBS - StatLine, 2022)

was that it would have a population of 250,000 by 2000. A few years after the first residents moved in during what Tzaninis (2015) refers to as the 'pioneering' phase Almere became a stigmatized and notorious place for a range of reasons. First, during the local elections in Almere in 1983 the *Centrumpartij* (Centre Party), the country's first explicitly extreme-right, anti-immigration party since World War II, secured more than 9 per cent of the vote – it only managed less than 1 per cent of the vote in the national election. Since then, Almere acquired a reputation as a stronghold of the extreme right given the electoral success of right-wing parties, especially the anti-immigration PVV, in the early 2010s. Yet, since the 2018 election, the PVV's influence has waned having lost the last two elections on account of an increasingly pluralistic political landscape. The current local council consists of no less than thirteen parties.[5] Second, Almere has been stigmatized for its large multicultural population. By the 1980s many new residents were first- and second-generation international migrants. Currently Almere's population is comprised of ethnicities from more than 130 countries, the largest among whom are Indian, Polish, Syrian and Chinese. As Amsterdam became more gentrified and less affordable, many international migrants have moved to Almere and other satellite towns giving rise to an alleged 'suburbanization of poverty' (Hochstenbach and Musterd, 2018). Notably, Almere has the lowest levels of spatial segregation in the country among its ethnic, education, and income categories, well below Amsterdam and other big cities (Boterman, 2019).

Tzaninis and Boterman (2018, p. 48) have noted the 'contradicting, competitive and dynamic nature' between Amsterdam and Almere. By analysing individual social and spatial mobility longitudinally, they show how in such post-suburbs there has been a 'gradual emergence of a diverse and heterogeneous population, in contrast with exist-

Figure 4. The new town of Almere under construction. (*Photo*: Yannis Tzaninis)

ing stereotypes of the classic middle-class family suburb' (*ibid*., p. 58). Moreover, they also challenge polycentricity and urbanocentrism, suggesting that urbanization and suburbanization 'constitute a cyclical, non-dichotomous spatio-temporal process which has recently materialized in the diversification of regional mobilities' (*ibid*.). Similar dynamics have been observed in other New Towns such as Lelystad (Spoormans *et al*., 2019), and within the metropolitan areas of Amsterdam and Utrecht where transformations are not uniform in either urban or suburban neighbourhoods (Hochstenbach and Musterd, 2021). These 'ripples of change' (Musterd *et al*., 2020) are the product of long-term, broad urban restructuring processes, mainly involving gentrification; such ripples have resulted in population change in whole metropolitan regions, manifesting in suburban diversification and the emergence of what Maginn and Anacker (2022) refer to as suburban blendscapes (also see Maginn and Phelps in this issue).

(Sub)Urban Blendscapes

The socio-spatial transformations that have taken place, and continue to do so, within metropolitan Milan and Amsterdam point to the emergence of 'post-suburban blendscapes'. This is reflected, for example, in the different housing morphologies between (and within) the Satellite neighbourhood in Pioltello with its high-rise apartment complexes (figure 5), and the low-rise residential buildings of Almere (figure 6).

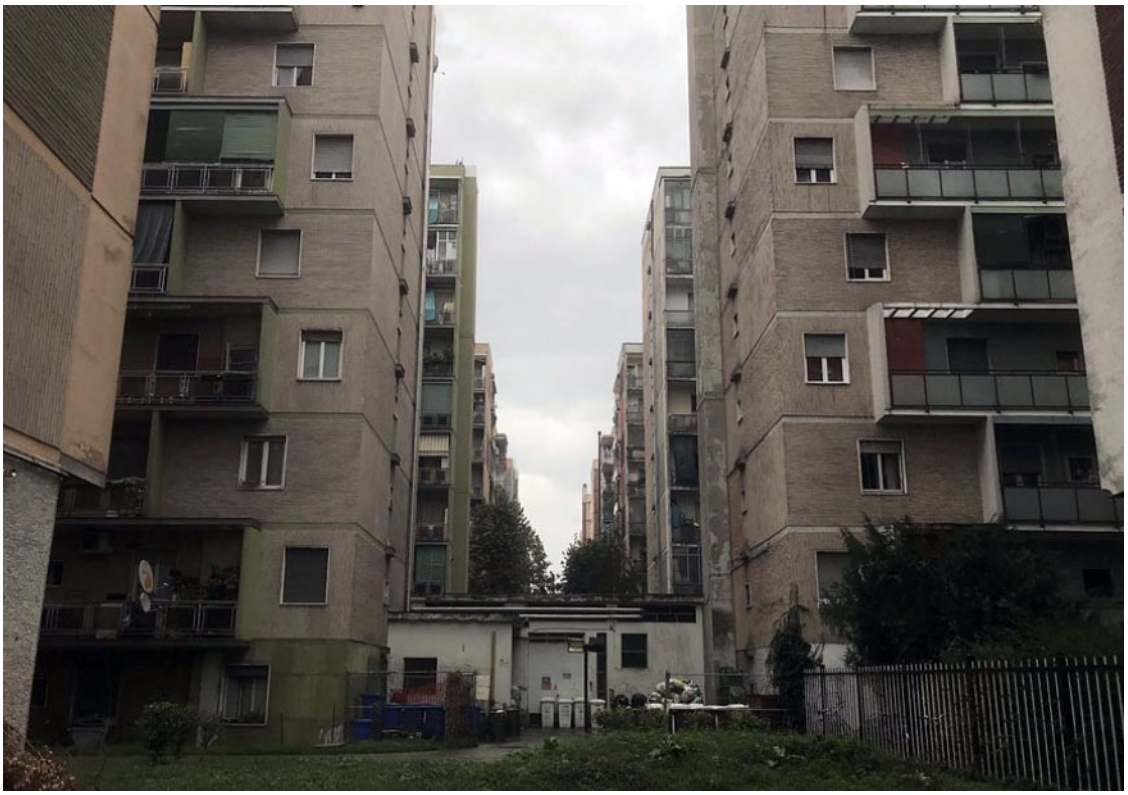

Figure 5. High-rise residential buildings in Pioltello. (*Photo*: Lorenzo De Vidovich)

In a post-suburban world, the suburbs are rapidly diversifying in morphological and demographic terms and thus challenge stereotypical, idealized perceptions of what constitutes suburban ways of living and the suburban vernacular. Contemporary suburbia is a container of 'suburban dreams *and* nightmares' (Maginn and Anacker, 2022). Our comparison of Milan (Pioltello) and Amsterdam (Almere) raises some insightful considerations regarding post-suburban diversity and a convergence between European and US suburbs in the sense that both are increasingly characterized as 'blendscapes' – i.e. more dense, more diverse, and less centred on nuclear families (Schneider, 2020).

Pioltello and Almere are blendscapes insofar as they have diverse housing morphologies (and other built form characteristics), politics, socio-economic conditions, and multicultural/cosmopolitan populations. In terms of cosmopolitanism (Noble, 2013), Pioltello and Almere are representative of a social and ethnic heterogeneity found in many suburbs globally that reinforces the conceptualization of Europe as a diverse continent wherein multiculturalism is an urban phenomenon (Müller, 2011; Noble, 2009).

Conclusions

Drawing attention to the salience of the label post-suburbia to understanding patterns and processes of contemporary urbanization in both conceptual and empirical terms, this paper presents a comparative analysis of two specific European contexts: Pioltello, in the urban region of Milan, and Almere,

Figure 6. Low-rise residential buildings in Almere. (*Photo*: Yannis Tzaninis)

in the urban region of Amsterdam. Despite the differences in Italian and Dutch (sub) urbanization, there are strong similarities in the emergence of post-suburban blendscapes within metropolitan Milan and Amsterdam. The two metropolitan regions, including their main cities, are themselves in flux, currently growing and adopting broad urban policies that target growth, housing, energy, and transportation. However, when it comes to those landscapes that comprise the metropolis outside the main cities, we see the dynamics of post-suburbia in full swing. Despite the veneer of ordinariness – i.e. suburban blandscape (see Maginn and Anacker, 2022; Maginn and Phelps this issue) – Pioltello and Almere are diverse and diversifying, economically active and retain an element of independence from their larger urban neighbours. The socio-economic and political gravitational pull of the urban centre within the Milan and Amsterdam metropolitan regions is of course difficult, if not impossible, to avoid. Nonetheless, as Pioltello and Almere (and other similar areas across Europe) continue to 'transition' and evolve as post-suburbs, these new blendscapes have the potential to help urban studies develop better analytical conceptualizations of (sub)urbanization processes and move us beyond 'urbano-centrist' perspectives.

NOTES

1. The Dutch State and most scholars use the indicator of 'migration background', based on the country of birth of the parents (which would inflate the number of 'foreign' residents in Amsterdam to more than 50 per cent). In our case we use nationality mainly for cohesion between the two cases and as a more straightforward indicator than the more arbitrary 'migration background'.

2. 'Post-Metropoli' was a national research project focused on urbanization processes in Italy by applying the theoretical lens of Soja's regional urbanization, with the aim of unfolding new forms of urbanity. It led to an Atlas that mapped and collected these transformations across the heterogeneous Italian territory: see: https://www.postmetropoli.it/.

3. ISTAT data (2020): https://demo.istat.it/.

4. See Chevalier and Tzaninis (2022) regarding the Zuiderzee Works, a series of water engineering projects beginning in the 1920s, which created 1,650 km² of reclaimed land for agriculture, industry and living.

5. Amsterdam currently has twelve parties in its local council.

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