

Suburban studies: State of the field and unsolved knots

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, suburban studies have emerged from a call for a new conceptual order to go beyond the traditional dichotomies of the urban realm, namely, the centre-periphery division. Such an approach distinguishes the city and suburbs as two separate entities, which hampers a better understanding of urbanization overall. Previously, studies of suburban areas have been interested in urban growth and regional development, albeit peripheral to the core themes of the research field. Yet a continuity of studies focusing on suburbs is appearing, and a proliferation of concepts has been produced to describe the diverse suburban forms according to specific features. Furthermore, suburbanization has now assumed a global dimension, as demonstrated by several recent studies and different new urban theories including “post-metropolis,” “planetary urbanization,” and “polycentric metropolis.” This article aims at pursuing a “suburban debate” by providing an overview of the current state of research while pointing out the main frictions and unsolved issues of this proliferating discussion. First, conceptual frictions that travel worldwide are addressed and discussed. Then, contemporary issues and challenges regarding the governance of areas at the “urban edges” are highlighted as fundamental aspects to cope with while observing the socio-spatial and socio-economic polarizations that are occurring in the constant (sub)urban expansion, as recently addressed by several scholars.

1 | INTRODUCTION: NURTURING THE SUBURBAN DEBATE

Suburbs can be considered as the core component of 21st century urban growth. Some reports, such as the “Atlas of Urban Expansion” (Angel, Parent, Civco, & Blei, 2012), illustrate a broad urban expansion extended from peripheral areas that are fully developed into a fringe where urban and rural land uses intermingle (Harris & Lehrer, 2018). A vibrant debate about suburbs has emerged over the last three decades, reaching a peak more recently. Indeed, Bernadette Hanlon and Thomas J. Vicino have recently released *The Routledge Companion to the Suburbs* (2018) to collect the most comprehensive examinations available to date. This article aims at building upon this increasing attention on suburbs to recognize their current contribution to understandings of urban transformations in the 21st century. However, placing a nuanced, analytical spotlight on the “review of the field of studies” is an anything but easy challenge. At first glance, suburban studies may generally refer to the understanding of those “constellations that provide novel insight into the urban condition” (Keil, 2018, p. 2). Nevertheless, the suburbs as an object of academic research and practical intervention intertwine a number of disciplines (from sociology to geography and urban planning) and analytical dimensions (from the physical built environment to the spatial planning and from the governance and scale issues to the infrastructures and service provision). In this regard, the very object of such fields of studies at first appears quite challenging to profile, especially nowadays that societies are increasingly complex and articulated. The suburban may be viewed as an all-encompassing field to deal with contemporary societal and urban transformations led by a plethora of processes (such as suburbanization), governmental actions (the planning for urban sprawl), and citizens' ways of living in growing urban contexts. The attempt to nurture a “suburban debate” is intended to acknowledge the increasing key role of suburbs in the contemporary “urban society” as places of disorder and possibility (Keil, 2018). In so doing, the article recognizes the work on suburbs as a significant contribution to the understanding of the most contemporary urban forms and features, albeit there is still little unity among scholars in the use of language related to suburbs (Harris & Vorms, 2017).

Suburbanization—i.e., the combination of non-centric population and economic growth with urban spatial expansion (Hamel & Keil, 2015, 2016)—is not a new phenomenon. As early as 1955, Kingsley Davis stated that urbanization was becoming increasingly widespread, foreseeing what would come to occur in the following decades: “at the periphery, it may be well that metropolis and the countryside, as the one expand and the other shrinks, will merge together” (p. 437). Later, the “urban revolution” theorized by Henri Lefebvre ([1970] 2003) paved the way for a new understanding of urban morphology extension, by observing a dislocation that engulfed suburbs in the urban core and extended the city far beyond its physical borders. As a consequence, urbanization today is mainly suburbanization in its manifold differentiation (Keil, 2013). Nevertheless, an “epistemological fragility” (Vaughan, Griffiths, Haklay, & Jones, 2009) has historically affected the suburban, both as a concept and in spatial identification. A primary definition of “suburbs” comes from P. H. Douglass (1925, p. 8) who identified them as “those communities within the total metropolitan areas which have a suburban identity of population, and from which, in addition, the heart of the city can be reached conveniently, quickly, at low-cost.” Today, suburbs are widely conceived as one part of the fabric of housing, commerce, and industry in contemporary urban settlements (McGee, 2013), although they might not be viewed as the linear expansion of metropolitan cores, but rather as the product of a combination of dynamics (Keil, 2017a, 2017b) such as—inter alia—neoliberal accumulation regimes (Peck, 2011), the rescaling of statehood (Brenner, 2004, 2009) and the decentralized regional economies (Storper, 1997). In this respect, suburban as a field of study does not represent a new category, but rather, it comes as a critical perspective in the light of a complete urban revolution. This contribution grounds its reflection on this critical viewpoint, assuming the risk associated with the oversight of a specific school of thought. The aforementioned contemporary dynamics of neoliberalization, state rescaling, and decentralization lie at the crossroads between neo-Marxist, Lefebvrian, and anti-capitalist perspectives. In this view, suburbs result as the products of a massive and complex urban expansion that altered both the urban fabric and realm. However, many scholars support a different view of the suburbs, one that strengthens the long-standing idea of desirable places where to live

(see Hall & Ward, 1998) and in opposition with the “detractors” that condemned suburbs for their antisocial tendencies (see Kotkin, 2005). This difference between various perspectives deserves a little more attention to account in detail the epistemology of the suburban. Differently, this review goes beyond Lefebvre’s vision of the urban and the subsequent debate that it sparked in the 1970s revolving around the twofold process of implosion–explosion that produced an increase of population and activities beyond the existing form of the city (see Keil, 2017a). In so doing, the article reflects on critical outlooks to shed light on the complexity of contemporary “suburban century”. This contribution first considers the consolidated blurring of urban–rural and centre-periphery dichotomies hence calibrating the theoretical review in light of “an outward expansion of urban areas that renders distinction between city and suburb rather arbitrary” (Phelps, 2012, p. 259). Alan Walks (2013, p. 7), drawing on Henri Lefebvre, has argued that “the suburban is conceptually an extension of urbanism.” Yet as suburbanization is a contemporary massive phenomenon, suburban is turning into a basis for a new and more comprehensive theory of the city and ultimately society (Harris & Vorms, 2017) beyond “centralist” biases.

Suburbs have historically been looked as a category subordinate to the urban. Literally, suburb means “partially urban” (Walks, 2013) or “under” the city (McManus & Ethington, 2007). Nick Phelps (2012) points to suburb as “sub-creative” places where innovation, creative economies, and productivity are not as much produced as compared to city centres. Equally, suburbs may be conceived as a secondary “subversive” urban form. Such views echoes the pre-industrial representation of “undesirable and shady places on the edge of town, with a mix of the poor with licentious habits” (Nijman & Clery, 2015, p. 59). Following the industrial revolution, this condition has steadily changed thanks to the growing interest by the upper classes in large estates reminiscent of the “garden city” (Howard, 1898) that inspired the North-American “suburban myth” (Donaldson, 2001; Masotti, 1973; Silverstone, 1997) of a living unhampered by the increasingly crowded cities and embodied by the ideal of elitism and wealthy class. Over the 20th century, many “suburban communities” have been developed on this model, through the sprawl of single-family dwellings. The classic of urban sociology *The Levittowners* by H. J. Gans (1967) had a pioneering role in revealing the ways of living in such American post-war suburbs. The process of suburbanization proceeded faster in the United States than elsewhere as a result of the vigorous industrialization that fuelled a more significant reordering of the cities (Nijman, 2013).

Acknowledging the early dominance of North-American literature, this article aims at fostering a global comprehensive framework by providing an overview of the main contributions to the debate on suburbs from a variety of perspectives. The review discloses an examination where “suburban” acts as an analytical perspective to cope with a global phenomenon instead of a simple criterion to define specific urban peripheral environments. On this basis, the article is organized in two strands: First, a review of main concepts and some valuable theories is provided to set out the debate. Second, the article raises two unsolved knots for a more extensive understanding. On the terminological side, it looks at whether and how “suburb” may be adopted as a one-size-fits-all term, whereas on the policy debate side, it calls for further “governance investigations” within a vibrant international debate.

2 | DEFINING SUBURBS: MANIFOLD CONCEPTS AND THEORIES FOR A LEXICON

As the birthplace of suburban studies, North-America has strongly influenced the recognition of suburbs as residential, middle-class, consumerist enclaves distinguished from the complexity of central cities (Beauregard, 2006; Beuka, 2004; Masotti, 1973; Teaford, 2008). This common image has continuously been updated over the decades. Since the post-WWII period, urban growth has occurred in manifold ways from planned sprawl to informality, in part related to globalization (Spencer, 2014) which produced new forms of urban areas (Soja, 1992). During the 1970s, during an era of transition for city development, Richard Walker (1977) declared the “suburban solution” to address the capitalist overproduction crisis, hence positioning suburbs at the core of how capitalist urbanization operates but

also of how it fails (Keil, 2017a, 2017b). Today, many years after seeking a solution in the suburban landscape, “spatial peripheralization goes along with social marginalization and/or sequestration of privileges both in classical gated communities and in newer forms of segregation, such as condominium complexes” (ivi: 55). Over the decades, planning of sprawl encountered both private and public interests (Gottdiener, 1977) within the accelerated growth that took place until the mid-1970s. In this respect, a number of scholars addressed the issue of defining suburbs according to the contemporary urban and socio-economic changes.

Across North-America, suburbs have been historically understood according to three specific characteristics: a series of low-density, automobile-dependent areas surrounding a city core (Moos & Mendez, 2015). Richard Harris (2010) sees “density,” “newness,” and “peripheral location” as the three defining qualities of a suburb, whereas Anne Forsyth (2014) considers the latter two—peripheral location and newness—as common key features. Others, such as Dunham-Jones and Williamson (2009), rather consider suburbs as lower-density and single-use private buildings in an automobile-oriented landscape made up of a looped network with cul-de-sacs. Through specific comparative studies, Harris and Larkham (1999) have defined forms, foundations, and definitions of suburbs by emphasizing five common dimensions: (a) peripheral location related to a dominant urban centre; (b) a specific residential character; (c) low densities with decentralized settlements and high levels of ownership; (d) a distinctive way of life; and (e) separate community identities, often embodied at the local governmental level. Based on this framework, McManus and Ethington (2007) identify seven key variables: peripheral location; relationship to the urban core (as a functional dependence); relationship to the countryside; density, relative to the urban core; housing types (at a first glance, low single-family dwellings are certainly considered the most common); social segregation (mainly class or ethnic); and cultural formations (utopian traditional models versus dystopian nature-devouring sprawl).

To cope with these various aspects, Anne Forsyth (2012) suggests defining suburbs according to particular specificities. In so doing, she states that more specific concepts will allow a better understanding of the governance and multi-scalar processes that lead suburban expansion, beyond viewpoints focused on the built environment and viewing suburban merely as transitional spaces in historical terms (McManus & Ethington, 2007), continuously reframed by flows of contemporary suburbanization processes. In this respect, Jussi Jauhainen (2013), by initially dividing suburbs from a morphological viewpoint into planned/unplanned, likewise calls for approaches able to intertwine economic, social, and technological perspectives. Over the years, a number of new terminologies have been devised, intrigued by such various analytical suggestions. Concepts such as “technoburbs” (Fishman, 1987) as spaces of post-Fordist restructuring, “boomburbs” (Lang & LeFurgy, 2007) to define the fast-growing cities at metropolitan fringes, “edge city” (Garreau, 1991) and the subsequent “edgeless city” (Lang, 2003; Lang & LeFurgy, 2003) intend to describe suburbs according to new urban configurations where centralities emerge in former peripheral areas through transitional processes that influence and continuously call for a reframing in light of urban growth. However, processes of (sub)urbanization differ in time and space around the world.

Although the United States has continued to be an important field of research in contemporary suburbanization for a considerable time (Sjöberg, 1960), new concepts and studies have begun to appear elsewhere. Recent contributions have addressed the diverse forms and features of “the suburban” in the Global South (see Caldeira, 2017). A large body of investigations have explored Latin-America, from the extended urbanization of Brazil (Castriota & Tonucci, 2018; Monte-Mor, 2014) to the private-led developments of Argentina (Roitman & Phelps, 2011) and Chile (Heinrichs, Lukas, & Nuissl, 2011). Studies of the massive urbanization in East Asia have paid specific attention to India (Kennedy, 2007), China (Wu & Shen, 2015), and the Philippines (Ortega, 2016) as well as to specific metropolises such as Tokyo (Sorensen, 2011), Seoul (Lee & Shin, 2011), and Jakarta (Leaf, 1994). Attention has also been devoted to the suburbanization of Sub-Saharan Africa (Mabin, 2013; Mabin, Butcher, & Bloch, 2013) and the massive suburban growth of Istanbul (Güney, Keil, & Üçoğlu, 2019).

The debate continues to travel also through Western countries. In the European context, Thomas Sieverts (2003) described the contemporary hybrid locations compressed amid the old city and the open countryside as

"in-between cities" (*Zwischenstadt*), amidst living space and non-places of mobility (Lehrer, 2013). This observation is grounded in the German environment, but other perspectives have addressed urban expansion according to the features of each national context by providing specific tailor-made notions, such as "ciutat de ciutats" in Spain (Nel-lo, 2001) and "città diffusa" in Italy (Indovina, Matassoni, & Savino, 1990). Equally, specificities of post-socialist suburbanization have been tackled (Hirt, 2007; Hirt, 2017; Hirt & Petrović, 2011). Since the Second postwar, European cities face the issue of constant urban growth by maintaining an urban dimension through densification and new territorial organizations among differently sized cities, instead of a large concentration of many metropolises (Indovina, 2016), as occurred in North-America. In this respect, "a diversity of developmental trajectories and processes operating within European setting" (Bontje & Burdach, 2005, p. 1745) emerged among a nodal and fragmented pattern of relationships (Batty, 2001, 2009) into a disparate urban fabric more compact than their North-American counterparts. Such divergence raises questions about the adoption of suburbs as a global concept to observe metropolitan edges, an issue that will be discussed in the conclusions. By providing a first overview, Table 1 summarizes most of the main terminologies coined over the three last decades to differentiate forms of urban edges.

However, any attempt to define suburbs cannot be separated from suburbanization. Urbanization today, in its broad contemporary view, can be classified mainly as suburbanization in various differentiation (Herington, 1984) due to its faster spatial development. It also consequently represents the latest phase of metropolitan expansion, where "urban regions have been stretched and reshaped to accommodate increasingly complex patterns of interdependence" (Lang & Knox, 2009, p. 791). While a "suburban debate" is still fed by different perspectives and terminologies, suburbs are now still best defined as a category to describe the built environment of housing settlement types (from high-rise condominiums to family homes), commercial and industrial spaces along with various infrastructures (such as transit networks or pipelines) (see McGee, 2013). In order to deal with such global heterogeneity, attention on suburbanization has been recently addressed by way of the themes of governance, land, and infrastructure (Ekers, Hamel, & Keil, 2012; Hamel & Keil, 2015; Harris & Lehrer, 2018; Keil, 2013; Phelps, 2017). The international research "Global Suburbanisms: Governance, Land and Infrastructure in the 21st Century"¹ has produced a large body of empirical, thematic, and conceptual insights and acknowledges that suburbs are today outcomes of multi-scale, multi-topological process and various modalities of governance that involve worldwide interactions and aspirations in a global world (Hamel & Keil, 2015; Keil, 2017a). In this respect, the field of "suburban governance" (Keil 2012; 2015; 2017b) deals with the complexity of the worldwide suburbanization phenomenon by referring to the variety of governance modes (state-led, capital-led and authoritarian-led) and stimulating at the same time new conceptual perspectives of suburban spaces beyond a "methodological cityism" (Connolly, 2019).

A new epistemology of the urban has been stressed by Brenner and Schmid (2014, 2015) who deal with the grey areas of the contemporary "urban age" (Burdett & Sudjic, 2011), seen as a faulty basis and a statistical artefact on which to conceptualize contemporary urbanization patterns. By criticizing the "urban age" theory through the idea of "planetary urbanization," Brenner and Schmid (2011) have also observed that those spaces beyond traditional city cores and peripheries have become an integral part of a worldwide urban fabric. In the same theoretical direction, Roberto Monte-Mòr (2014) theorizes a process of "extended urbanization" by referring to the social organization of space in contemporary capitalism where the dominance of the city over the country produces new forms of "urban" citizenship built atop the expansion of urban-industrial fabric. Edward Soja, instead, through the theory of "post-metropolis" (Soja, 2000, 2011), has described a multi-scalar process of "regional urbanization" (Soja, 2013, 2015): a complex web where centre and periphery are more mixed patterns within urbanization, flourishing into an intensification of socio-economic inequalities, disadvantages, and social polarizations (Soja, 2012). Peter Hall and Kathy Pain (2006) observed European mega-city regions as "polycentric metropolises." The large body of contemporary critical theories have sparked a growing interest in these new differentiated urban forms. However, the need to shed light on the very notion of suburban studies persists. In this respect, attention must be devoted to the real existing conceptual tensions and governing issues around the suburban.

TABLE 1 Definitions of suburbs: A contemporary chronological overview according to specific features

| Definition | Author(s) | Field of analysis | Brief description |
|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Outer city | Herington (1984) | United Kingdom | Maintaining “garden city” principles in suburbs not absorbed by “urbanization” |
| Web of cities | Dematteis (1985) | Italy | Reticular web of cities reproduced in less-urban contexts, led by “counter-urbanization” phenomena |
| Technoburbs | Fishman (1987) | United States | Overlap of housing, industry, commerce, agricultural uses, and political jurisdictions within the same area |
| “Città diffusa” | Indovina et al. (1990) | Italy | Compact mid-cities less dense than urban areas led by relocation of production activities and presence of urban services |
| Edge city | Garreau (1991) | United States | Concentration of traditional downtown activities in previously residential and rural areas through fast-growth processes |
| Desakota | McGee (1991) | Indonesia | Asian increasingly urbanized settlements between urban and rural areas |
| Exopolis | Soja (1992) | United States | Rural settlements developed on the “second” urban fringes |
| Flexspace | Lehrer (1994) | Switzerland | New spatial and environmental articulation between urban and rural in Western cities |
| Post-modern urbanism | Dear and Flusty (1998) | United States | Centres of globalizing capitalism in the urban periphery |
| Ethnoburbs | Li (1998) | United States | Immigrant communities' edge-towns |
| “Ciutat de ciutats” | Nel-lo (2001) | Spain | Articulated network of cities with strong “territorial” and socio-economic relations |
| Edgeless city | Lang (2003) | United States | Continuous fast-growing cities on the regional fringe of a metropolitan area |
| In-between city | Sieverts (2003) | Germany | New hybrid forms of European cities due to metropolitan expansion |
| Boomburbs | Lang and LeFurgy (2007) | United States | Fast-growing towns between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, close to a metropolis or bigger city |
| Metroburbia | Knox (2008, 2017) | United States, UK (London) | Suburban and exurban areas distinguished by a fully metropolitan landscape |

Source: Author's construction on 200 references database.

3 | UNSOLVED KNOTS: CONCEPTUAL DISPUTES AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

The discussed multitude of concepts and theories calls for a conceptual order beyond those traditional dichotomies of urban fields that still hamper our understandings of urbanization overall (Keil, 2017a, 2017b; Merrifield, 2012; Schafran, 2013). Cities and suburbs are not built by academic debate but by struggles in space and time (Keil, 2018). Insights into these struggles reveal that debate of what is urban and what is suburban is still ongoing, albeit the suburbs are largely invisible in theoretical inquiries on the urban future (Keil, 2018). For that very reason, the field

of suburban studies faces some unresolved issues determined by the need to comprehend the very notion of “suburb” on the one hand and the future governing challenges of such transitional spaces according to their heterogeneity in forms and functions on the other hand.

Starting from the first issue, conceptual disputes might be summed up into a single key question: Is suburb a one-size-fits-all concept that globally travels to study those settlements at the urban edges? The response requires further debate. The suburbs may be framed according to different perspectives, i.e., as a dimension of extended urbanization, a fragment of the worldwide urban expansion or as a new space from which the urban fabric has to be understood (Keil, 2018). A general overview pushes towards a slight congruence between the suburban and the urban periphery, insofar that both concepts appear primarily subordinated to the urban (Lefebvre, 1967, 2003). Recently, naming processes of urban peripheries have been tackled by Richard Harris and Charlotte Vorms (2017) through an outline of the variety of everyday local terminologies worldwide adopted (from the Brazilian “favelas” to the Indian “slums” and from the “borgate” of Rome to the Indonesian “kampungs”). By unravelling the different meanings and connotations, they notice that the usages of such terms may substitute the broad concept of suburb. Generally, suburbs look today as parts of city regions and/or metropolitan areas (Phelps, 2017) distant from CBDs or downtowns. Nevertheless, the flexible and transitional character of suburbs enable a reframing according to the global processes that led to more extended urban constellations (Gandy, 2011) today turned suburban (Keil, 2013). As observed by Calafati (2017) in Italy, the numerous towns located at the outskirts of urban cores now represent the “new urban peripheries” of a metropolitan area, resulting from processes of suburban growth affected by uneven infrastructural developments and overlapping socio-spatial fragilities (Filion & Keil, 2016).

However, this spatial flexibility within metropolitan expansion does not dissolve doubts of the global adoption of suburb as one-size-fits-all concept. Although the European-American experience has been heavily hegemonic and neglecting most other global experiences (Roy, 2009), a confrontation between these two Western contexts may be helpful to face the conceptual dispute. Such inquiry points to the notion of “post-suburbia” as the contemporary frame for suburban changes throughout the world. In the compact European cities, the Anglo-Saxon venues of “bourgeois utopia” (see Fishman, 1987) are less visible and less massive, albeit they exist. Furthermore, many North-American terms do not travel well in Europe (Phelps, 2017). Two main differences intervene between the patterns of European and North-American suburbanization: a “dimensional disparity” (Mazierska & Rascaroli, 2003) on the one hand, which relies on differences in the geographic scale of suburbanization, and a “temporal disparity” (Phelps, Parsons, Ballas, & Dowling, 2006) in timing and speed of suburban expansion, on the other hand. Processes of decentralization, growth of car usage, retail parks, and offices clusters have been much more extreme and extensive in U.S. suburbanization (Mazierska & Rascaroli, 2003). As argued by Bontje and Burdach (2005), European suburban developments can be conceived as a typical variation of the American “edge city,” albeit the adaption of such concept needs to be calibrated in light of institutional European transformations at different territorial scales (Phelps & Parsons, 2003). Although this comparison is limited to a Western observation, it reveals how suburbanization comes today as a global process shaped by site-specific economic, demographic, geographical, institutional, and cultural conditions (Pagliarin & De Decker, 2018) leading to collective complex governance articulations (Ekers et al., 2012; Hamel & Keil, 2015; Keil, 2017a).

As the latest step of a long analytical path, the term “post-suburbia” has emerged over the last two decades, to expand comparative analyses beyond the contextual development of mono-functional North-American residential sprawl (Phelps et al., 2006; Phelps & Wood, 2011; Phelps, Wood, & Valler, 2010; Phelps & Wu, 2011). Post-suburbia is a global phenomenon (Phelps & Wu, 2011) largely investigated in Europe through research on the multiform place-making process that occurred, for instance, from the southern suburbia of Madrid to that of London (see Phelps et al., 2006). Globally, “post-suburban” entails the understanding of Post-Fordist “urbanized” infrastructural development that was brought to the worldwide expansion of scattered suburbs. Furthermore, post-suburbia stresses the current political inconsistencies inherent to the emergent uneven development of different sizes, timings, and in diverse geographical contexts (Pagliarin & De Decker, 2018).

In a nutshell, post-suburbia is a key to understanding contemporary suburbanization in its heterogeneity, by tackling the variety of capitalisms, welfare, planning, housing systems, land ownership, industry structures, and ideologies present (Phelps & Tarazona Vento, 2015). In so doing, the post-suburban provides a geographical and conceptual framework for political action (Young & Keil, 2014). Yet “suburb” has been increasingly adopted as an all-purpose concept, rather than an in-depth description of the places where most recent urbanization processes have taken place. Eurostat, for instance, shall employ the synthetic statistical indicator of “towns and suburbs” referring to “intermediate density areas.”² Similarly, an ongoing URBACT III European programme entitled “Sub>urban. Reinventing the post-war urban fringe to achieve sustainable densification”³ (see van Tuijl & Verhaert, 2018) clearly demonstrates how “suburb” is nowadays a concept embedded in the European debate. The European-American differences highlight how suburbs are today object of interests due to their uneven and complex development. In this respect, “suburban” should not be seen as a one-size-fits-all term, but rather as an encompassing perspective to globally study urban edges in their multidimensional complexity, whereas suburbanization serves as a vantage point from which to theorize contemporary urban society overall (Keil, 2017b). Therefore, it may be argued that “the suburban” is running into an “unpacking” process aimed at pointing the theoretical choices involved in defining suburbs and suburban ways of living as specific objects of studies (Hamel & Keil, 2015) to investigate societal changes, rather than pursuing an unruly usage of the concept of “suburb” to describe what stands beyond the city, within metropolitan areas and on a peripheral location.

The contemporary post-suburban scenario introduces a key issue for suburban studies, i.e., the concern with governance in the light of a worldwide uneven development of (post)suburban settlements. For decades, social transformations and the intra-urban socio-economic disparities between centres and peripheries have acted as a fracture zone, posing challenges for the governance of urban places (McGee, 2013). Nowadays, such issues are reproduced in suburban landscapes. Nearly everywhere, suburbs are segmented in pockets of wealth and poverty reflecting varying levels of accessibility and trajectories of economic development and decline (Filion & Keil, 2016). High levels of unevenness in the availability to infrastructures produce new patterns of social inequalities. As a consequence, the focus on suburban governance becomes crucial, as it addresses the governance modes, the variety of actors and of socio-spatial relations that lie behind such uneven suburban development, fragmented into venues of poverty (Anacker, 2015) and neoliberalism (Peck, 2011). In this regard, suburbs inform us about the directions taken by the neoliberalization of spaces (Peck & Tickell, 2002). To address such tensions, a key role is attributed to the so-called suburbanisms, i.e., the suburban ways of living (Hamel & Keil, 2015; Walks, 2013). Any study on governance should address the inter-institutional capacity to meet the needs that trigger daily life and the accessibility to amenities by suburban population. This post-suburban framework puts into place these analytical directions by coping with the set of actors that govern the suburban realm and their inter-linkages bounded to spatial planning systems and related socio-political configurations (Pagliarin & De Decker, 2018). Suburbanisms are challenging objects to understand in 21st century urban society. Yet inquiries into suburban governance should consider what is currently occurring in the “places that does not matter” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), abandoned by policies and programmes that largely invested in cities instead. Towns such as Flint, Michigan, the declining British mid-towns where Brexit found large agreement or the fragile Italian rural “inner areas” affected by depopulation fall into this category. In so doing, suburban governance “acts” in a post-suburban international context where different pathways of state-led, private-led, and capital-led development animate the governance of suburbanization (Ekers et al., 2012). Impacts of suburban governance are visible in fields of spatial planning such as transit networks—especially in city regions—housing provision by the public actor or through the private market, organization of public and social infrastructures (roads, sewer, water systems, schools, and health and social services) as well as in inter-municipal agreements. Spatial outcomes of suburban governance are embedded in the process of “retrofitting suburbia” (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2009) at a time of massive urban expansion and space production that is primarily interested in suburbs and urban edges. In this regard, the contribution of the international research effort “Global Suburbanisms” produced a large mixture of conceptual and empirical approaches to study the governance phenomena related to suburbanisms and global suburbanization (see Hamel & Keil, 2015).

4 | CONCLUSION

Suburbs inform us about the contemporary trajectories of the “urban age” that characterized most of the 20th century. Recent research into post-suburbanization acknowledges the importance of focusing on the governance of these unevenly developed areas. From North-America, a number of concepts have helped to better identify suburbs according to specific features. However, a globally comprehensive agreement of “suburb as one-size-fits-all” is not fully detectable. The current state of the field of suburban studies provides an international vibrant debate, addressed here through a confrontation between North-America and Europe. Although the global adoption of suburbs is still questionable, research and theories confirm the vital role of suburbs as a travelling perspective on which to pursue further investigations about the less explored issues beyond that of spatial sprawl. Suburbanization therefore seems to be the key process to cope with during the 21st century, although further inquiries may clarify differences, for instance, between suburbanization as a combination of numerous phenomenon and sprawl as a planned local and regional land-use strategy (see Pagliarin, 2018). The governance of suburbs requires further exploration as it merges urban trajectories in historically non-urban landscape and settlements. In this way, governance acts as a tool to accelerate inquiries beyond methodological cityism and urbanism, legitimized by the body of new urban theories that critically address (sub)urban transformation during the contemporary period of social changes (from planetary urbanization to post-metropolis and from urban political ecology to extended urbanization). Furthermore, inquiries into governance may be fertilized by some new experimentations based upon the hypothesis of reshaped urban patterns and channelled into new analytical mappings. In Italy, for instance, a research inspired by the concept of post-metropolis provided an “Atlas” to set out the main governance, sustainability, and liveability challenges in the new regional forms of urbanity (Balducci, Fedeli, & Curci, 2017). Meanwhile, the framework of “Global Suburbanisms” created the “Atlas of Suburbanisms” to quantitatively observe contemporary ways of living in North-American suburbs (Moos & Walter-Joseph, 2017). By seeking an analytical coherence into the manifold concepts of suburb, this review stresses two main aspects: (a) Through “post-suburban” perspectives, it is today possible to address and reframe the complexity of suburban developments; (b) suburb may not represent a universal one-size-fits-all concept to observe urban edges, despite its global usage. Rather, the innovative analytical perspectives that rely on such concepts may play a key role in driving new investigations on socio-spatial and socio-economic changes, as well as dealing with the planning and governmentality of urban-edge territories. Moving from the most recent research contributions, this article presses for further empirical studies to assess suburbanisms and citizens' needs in suburbs, according to the large plethora of critical viewpoints regarding urban expansion inspired by the “urban revolution” of Henri Lefebvre. The path towards further investigations into suburban governance may encompass a number of policy fields, from transport infrastructure to social and welfare services provision and from water and sewage to housing and land consumption. All these aspects refer to a key topic of how to improve decent, just, and equal conditions of living in areas encapsulated by processes of uneven (sub)urban development, where socio-spatial patterns have been previously less explored while taking place.

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ENDNOTES

¹More info on the international research “Global Suburbanisms: Governance, Land and Infrastructure in the 21st century”: <http://suburbs.info.yorku.ca/>

²“Towns and suburbs” are for Eurostat Glossary, those areas where less than 50% of the population lives in rural grid cells and less than 50% live in high-density clusters. More info: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:Town_or_suburb

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