

# A SUBURB IS NOT A TREE

Laura Vaughan and Sam Griffiths analyse the evolution of suburban centres



Christopher Alexander famously proposed that urban centres work to form a lattice of overlapping sets of socio-spatial systems. Despite this, there is still a prevailing view that town centres are best viewed as part of a rank-ordered hierarchy. Such representations are rarely value neutral since they are typically assembled using statistical measures such as retail or commercial floor area that inevitably emphasise the primacy of large centres. The danger of policies premised on town centre hierarchies produced in this manner is that they risk creating a self-perpetuating cycle of decline in which smaller centres that are less attractive for big businesses will be increasingly perceived as falling behind, reinforcing the argument for ever-increasing centralisation of shopping activities.

In opposition to hierarchical or polycentric models of cities such as London, the urban theorist Bill Hillier has proposed the alternative notion of ‘pervasive centrality’ to explain how town centres function at all scales and in all sizes throughout the urban street network. Recent EPSRC-sponsored research at UCL has investigated sources of socio-economic sustainability in London’s outer suburbs. It has suggested that pervasive centrality helps maintain an interdependence between spatial, social and economic factors within cities.

Our research found that reductive approaches to measuring ‘town centeredness’ in terms of market catchment tended to disregard the complex

socio-spatial conditions that sustain mixtures of land-uses in local centres such as Chipping Barnet, South Norwood and Surbiton which are frequently dismissed as being purely retail centres, despite the data available to refute this notion. We propose that the long-term viability of such centres arises from their ability to support a mixture of different land uses that are positioned so as to take advantage of their position in the network.

Although London’s outer suburbs are no longer manufacturing hubs, local business and small-scale industrial activities are often located in proximity to the centres. Their presence is indicative of the continuing economic and social importance of the suburbs as places of work. Our fieldwork revealed small workshops, garages and other minor industrial activities to be characteristic features of the suburban landscape. Tucked away in courtyards or in back streets (as opposed to isolated industrial parks) they help to sustain an interdependent mesh of production, services, offices and shops, which as an ensemble serve to generate movement around and through the town centre. The *High Street London report* confirms this picture, noting that behind the relatively stable street frontages are buildings described as more ‘transient and temporary’. The size of units also allows for adaptability, in that a smaller unit can change usage without costly structural change. This is less in evidence with big-box supermarkets that typically

↑ Density of retail activity overlaid on London-wide accessibility



interrupt the regular intervals of doorways and windows along the length of the high street.

**MIXED USE AND MEASURES OF SUCCESS**

It is often assumed that to be regarded as successful, a suburban centre has to follow a gentrification model, characterised by the appearance of upmarket shops, artisan bakeries and boutique coffee outlets. Such a model neglects the more mundane attractions of a location such as Borehamwood in outer-north London, with its thriving twice-weekly market and mixture of local firms, community enterprises, corporate headquarters and ethnic shops, as well as the inevitable cluster of national chains housed in its self-styled Boulevard. This bias is because standard measures of town centre success tend to overlook places that are socio-economically active in the broadest sense – encompassing leisure and community as well as retail – but that lack the smartness and prestige brands of more prosperous locations. Fast food outlets or pound shops may even be viewed as measures of decline, yet such places that may be distinctly distasteful to brand-conscious council officers may also, ironically perhaps resist being characterised as clone towns. Many of London's less fashionable suburban centres have managed to survive, even thrive, against the

↑ Glass studio, Chipping Barnet  
 ↑↑ Polish convenience store, South Norwood

odds for long periods of time. It is worth urban designers trying to understand the reasons for this.

A recent report emphasises how high streets can be social centres, stating that ‘wanting to go into town is about an experience. It is about sociability and relaxation, creativity and being part of something you cannot get at home or at work...’. The greater the mix of activities, the more likely a centre will be a hub for the social life of the suburb. A high street is so much more than its shops. A study of neighbourhood identity, for example, explains how ‘community [is] constructed through familiar, everyday social interactions within various... settings... often enough to give people a powerful sense of attachment and belonging’. One can reasonably extend this reference to encompass the humble high street. Our own research found that a significant proportion of sampled visitors to suburban town centres had undertaken activities other than shopping; indeed, many of these did not intend to shop at all.

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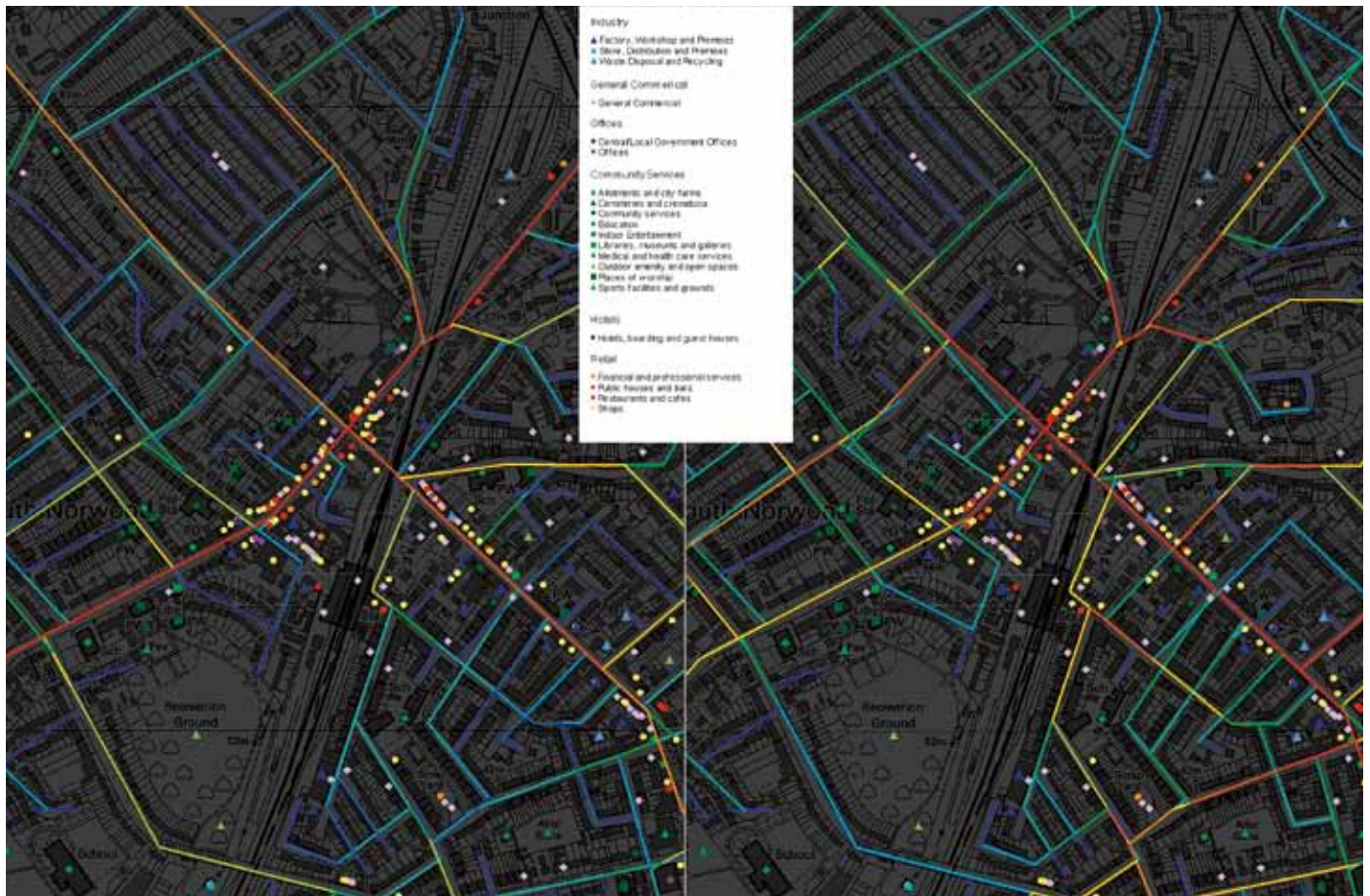
It is, of course, evident that shops in smaller centres can find it difficult to operate independently, since they need have access to sufficient numbers of potential customers to make them viable. However, the challenge of high streets is the need to provide both ‘links in a movement system that connects places’, and ‘destinations, or “places” in their own right’. In other words the socio-economic viability of an individual suburban centre relates also to their interdependence in terms of both public and private transport connections.

**PERVASIVE CENTRALITY AND LAND USE SYNERGY**

Christopher Alexander has shown that town centres are fields of relatively intense activity, providing ‘a contrast between intensity and calmness’. He states that: ‘the wholeness of any portion of the world is the system of larger and smaller centres, in their connections and overlap’. This is confirmed by our findings that suggest that London’s suburbs have adapted to historical patterns of movement between different centres; the way in which they overlap and converge affects their subsequent development. Building types and land-use distributions that may appear characteristically local may have emerged over a great deal of time as a consequence of the position of a centre within the urban network.

Space Syntax analysis considers the urban network as a spatial configuration, proposing a fundamental relationship between spatial morphology, movement patterns and the distribution of land uses as a ‘movement economy’. The synergy of activities in and around suburban town centres has been shown to stem from the presence of overlapping movement flows, which





in turn create the conditions for local diversity in land use. Using space syntax analysis the through-movement accessibility of South Norwood, a suburb in south-east London can be measured (see image above). At radius-n (left), the model takes account of all streets within London. It shows how the centre has important links at the larger urban scale. At radius-800m (right), the model takes account of all streets at a distance approximating a ten-minute walk into the surrounding residential area.

Statistical analysis shows that non-residential land uses correspond with the most spatially accessible streets within the area. This highlights the importance of the streets and yards just off or behind the retail-focused high street. It suggests how the interdependence between retail and other types of non-residential activity, whether on the high street or adjacent to it, arises because the built environment of London's suburbs is well adapted to sustain a wide variety of activities. It is also interesting to consider how smaller centres adapt to their relative inaccessibility to the wider network by developing a niche specialism aimed at a non-local as well as local market, in some cases using the internet as a parallel stream of revenue to a local business. This suggests how smaller centres can provide low-risk locations for businesses to start up. With greater flexibility in land uses classes, business rates and rents, such adaptability can contribute to regeneration.

#### MIXED USE INTERDEPENDENCE

Accounts of urban hierarchies commonly focus on the largest towns including the metropolitan centre and major regional hubs. However, simplistic notions of hierarchy are inadequate to address the complexity of the urban system, which

encompasses multiple links between larger and small centres, places of home, work and leisure that are better described in terms of a mesh than as a hierarchical, tree-like system. Urban design does not directly determine the distribution of land uses – neither should it always seek to do so. Many high streets in the suburbs of Greater London have survived as centres of socio-economic activity for a century or more despite the radical socio-economic changes that have occurred over that period – and the current economic downturn notwithstanding. Nurturing this quality of adaptability is vital for sustaining smaller centres of activity and for the resilience of the urban network as a whole.

Of course, the dream of a suburban renaissance may never be fulfilled, but it is hoped that this article has shown why many of London's suburban town centres already possess the potential for genuine sustainability in their ability to support the diverse socio-economic activity and a dynamic neighbourhood street life. An analysis of suburban places that takes account of the relative stability of their development is, we suggest, an essential basis for designing for the future adaptability and vitality of suburban town centres, whether in London or beyond. It is also important that urban designers should consider how the interdependence of urban systems relates to the design of particular sites and locations. ●

↑ South Norwood town centre: street sections are coloured in a range of red-blue, showing through-movement potential

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