**The uncoolhunt: searching for the creative suburb**

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Perhaps it took a global pandemic for the popular imagination to catch up with what some of us had been saying about suburbs for years. As cities across the world ground to a halt in early 2020, there was a boom in writing about ‘the death of the city’. The pandemic was being seen as a turning point for an ‘inside-out’ model of economies and cultures that had put cities, and particularly the seemingly unstoppable great global cities, as the centres of dynamism and innovation. In a paean to those great cities, and for the urgency of their recovery, a leader article in *The Economist* couldn’t resist adding yet another entry to a catalogue of suburban disparagement as old as the modern city: vibrant and successful cities that ‘cram together talented people who are fizzing with ideas’ were contrasted with ‘the joy of suburban life’ that ‘derives from the houses and gardens that are more affordable there.’ (*The Economist* 2020) But elsewhere commentators were rapidly discovering that the world beyond the metropolitan might have more to offer than the supposed passivity of domestic life and horticulture. Buried in endless columns and blog-posts targeted at urban professionals making sense of their new lockdown lives – on working-from-home, on Zoom dress codes, on balancing work and home schooling – has been a broader and more profound re-evaluation of certain kinds of suburban spaces and their creative potential.

As this collection demonstrates, the creative qualities of suburbia have been hiding in plain sight across time and cultures, and have a history that is far richer and longer than the 2020 ‘discovery’ of the potential of the home office or the inspiring qualities of a jog around a local park (and guilty as charged – I am indeed writing this during the third UK lockdown in a home office in a west London suburb after my legally-permitted local morning run.) But before leaving the obsessions of a relatively privileged group in particular kinds of cities and suburbs, I want to make one further dip into that response to the pandemic. The pattern is not completely consistent, but in many major cities affected by the pandemic there has been a financial revaluation as well as cultural re-evaluation of the suburbs. This of course has been primarily about safety and space in the face of a potentially deadly infection and restrictions on movement. But it might also reflect that some of the most stubborn cultural associations with suburbia are changing. The property pages of *The Times* in August 2020 identified a surge in suburban house prices around London, but also suburbia’s new ‘coolness’, for as ‘city centres lie silent, it is now where the young aspire to be.’ (Lewis 2020)

This might have been just a throwaway line in a throwaway property supplement, but the mention of coolness and young aspirations hits a nerve for those of us interested in the creativity of suburbia. The idea of coolness, seemly hard to define, is a key cultural element of ‘inside-out’ thinking about cities and suburbs, a kind of central place theory of the imagination (cross-REF to introduction?). That sense of the cultural superiority of the urban has a particularly blunt expression in the celebration of those crammed-together talented people fizzing with ideas, the so-called creative classes in their creative cities lauded by a certain school of urban boosterism. (Florida 2002; Landry 2008) But this creative superiority of the city is much more longstanding and engrained. Its apotheosis comes perhaps in the veneration of Paris as in Benjamin’s term ‘the capital of the nineteenth century.’(Benjamin 1999) The very ‘invention’ of modernity becomes a urban phenomenon bound up with concentrated, central changes in power, consumption and culture. ‘Cool’ before the term, a special place is given to the Parisian poets of urban modernity; for Benjamin, it is Baudelaire’s creativity that unlocks the paradoxes and contradictions of modern life, a creativity that is intimately bound to the practices of being in a city of crowds, spectacle and commodity capitalism. (Benjamin 2006)

Writing in *The New Yorker* in 1997, the cultural critic Malcolm Gladwell coined the term the ‘coolhunt’. He tracked the ways that multinational sports-shoe companies sent ‘coolhunters’ out to journey into Harlem and the Bronx ‘giving chase to the elusive prey of street cool.’ (Gladwell 1997, 78) This was a particularly late-twentieth century version of that long-running connection of urban authenticity and commodity capitalism, with a view that determining ‘cool’ could only come from ‘certain kids in certain places’; certain places that mass-market consumers would understand as the streets and ‘hoods’ of the great cities. Gladwell discusses the circularity of the process, particularly the way Nike and Reebok started to seed new experimental limited-run versions of shoes to just those ‘certain kids in certain places’. Gladwell’s essay points to the double-sided and racialised relationship between fashion culture (and popular culture more widely) and inner-city life in the United States; built into the coolhunt are both fears and romanticisation of African-American and Latinx urban cultures, as somehow more real, more dangerous, more cutting-edge than mundane lives in places beyond the city.

We can adopt and expand the idea of the coolhunt to think about other kinds of journey in search of urban cool. One of the most common tropes in literature and biography is the journey from village, small town or suburb to the city. Such journeys are also coolhunts, searching not just for the bright-lights and excitement of the big city, but also a creative remaking of self in an environment of possibilities, happenstance and liberating anonymity. In Hanif Kureishi’s classic semi-autobiographical account of the move from suburb to city, *The Buddha of Suburbia,* the central character, Karim expresses the change to his sense of self and his creative potential brought about by a move from suburban Bromley to central London:

‘So this was London at last, and nothing gave me more pleasure than strolling around my new possession all day. London seemed like a house with five thousand rooms, all different; the kick was to work out how they connected, and eventually walk through all of them.’  (Kureishi 1990, 126)

However if we look more closely at these coolhunting narratives, we often start to see something different, that destabilises these familiar tropes. This perspective thinks about the spatiality of creativity differently undercutting the supposed cultural superiority of the city. One of my favourite examples comes in the 2008 documentary *Beautiful Losers.* At first sight, this is an archetypal coolhunt journey. A disparate group of artists working in graffiti, punk and skateboard subcultures is picked up and pulled together by the Alleged Gallery in New York’s Lower East Side. The film contrasts the group’s suburban roots with the hipness of the city, and a key scene in the documentary is of their arrival in the streetscapes of Manhattan. Aaron Rose, curator of the Alleged Gallery’s Beautiful Losers exhibition was one of the directors of the film, and the story it tells is one of discovery, fame and for some of the artists significant commercial success and uptake by corporate marketing. Yet unintentionally what the film also does is to draw attention to the intimate and creative relationship between suburban landscapes and the art of Margaret Killgallen, Barry McGee, Ed Templeton and the other beautiful losers. Read differently the story becomes one about the creative possibilities of everyday marginal spaces of skateboard parks, scrubland plots and domestic garages – and also a story of the perils of co-option into a metropolitan scene.

There is a version these stories that involves a return to the place supposedly escaped from, and a recognition of its previously unacknowledged importance, that we might also think of as ‘uncoolhunts.’ The musician Tracey Thorn (Everything But the Girl, Massive Attack) in her memoir *Another Planet: A Teenager in Suburbia* tells of growing up in Brookman’s Park, an outer commuter suburb sitting ‘in a sea of green just off the coast of London’. (Thorn 2020, 9) In some ways, it’s a conventional coolhunt journey: ‘I’m not the only person to have grown up stifled and bored in suburbia; it’s almost the law.’(Thorn 2020, 96) She writes of the growing distance between her parents and her teenage self in terms of competing cultural geographies of city and suburb: ‘Did they sense something in me breaking away, turning my back on them? Youth culture, tribalism, music, creativity, all of this was a kind of modern, urban misbehaviour, and more alarming to them than pubs, snogging older boys, or cars on country lanes’.(Thorn 2020, 140) And yet, reflecting later while walking around the landscape of those teenage days, she writes of her ‘suburban bones’, and the complexities of her relationship with that past: ‘I feel terribly at home here, and terribly out of place.’(Thorn 2020, 204)

This sense of an ambivalent relationship with an edge-place and a life of creativity, is beautifully expressed in a recent essay by the poet and novelist Lavinia Greenlaw. She talks of her ongoing refusal to engage with ‘the landscape that has been most formative to me ... one that I don’t remember looking at.’(Greenlaw 2021) *Forthcoming.* This the landscape of 1970s Essex, a place that ‘was blurring into the city while refusing to become a suburb.’ Again, the supposed constrictions on creativity are expressed geographically, emphasising the physical and creative flatness of the edge-lands of Essex: ‘I wanted to be in a place that met me with drama. This meant the city and if not the city then at least a steep hill, high cliff or ruined cathedral. Essex didn’t offer such easy charms.’(Greenlaw 2021) But this between-scape leaves its creative mark, its plainness demanding attention to detail, reflected in the poet’s craft. Greenlaw’s ambivalence becomes bound up with the creative potential of resistance and refusal: ‘The Essex I am describing is one I remember and invented. It’s also one I absorbed far more than I knew. It went in deeply because of my resistance to it – as well as its resistance to me.’

The narrative of escape, but the reminder of the suburban (and edge-land) conditions of early creative development, have become one of the themes of the approach of what has sometimes been described as the ‘new suburban studies’ (although now not particularly new).(Gilbert 2004, 444) These approaches seek to challenge and complicate deep-seated tropes about the suburbs as dull, conservative, inward-looking, and distinctly uncreative. In English new suburban studies, the London suburb of Bromley often stands for a much wider phenomenon, the ‘most significant suburb in British in pop history.’(Frith 1996, 271) Bromley produced not only David Bowie in the late 1960s, but also Souxie Sioux, Billy Idol and the wider ‘Bromley contingent’ in the British punk wave. As Rupa Huq suggests this connection between suburbia and popular music is found across genres, periods, different national contexts and different forms of suburbia.(Huq 2013) Of course, escape, rebellion and rejection are key elements of much of this music, but so too is a fine-grained attention to detail and the nuances of class, identity and geography, a sensibility often transplanted into a suburban gaze on the city.

These forms of creativity can be seen as a particular form of uncoolhunt, a recognition of the creative importance of the journey from suburb to city, of the lasting echoes of sensibilities acquired in suburban landscapes, but also of the creative significance of the kind of continuing double refusal suggested by Greenlaw. However, this collection, with its historical and geographical range can be taken as a broader kind of uncoolhunt, that seeks to destabilise the geographies of cool more radically. This is not just about recognising the hidden suburban histories in the creative careers of those who left to fizz in the big city. Instead, I think we can suggest a number of ways this uncoolhunt proceeds.

Firstly, as the introduction suggests, this uncoolhunt broadens and reshapes our understanding of the nature of creativity. Much recent work has challenged the co-option of creativity as the primary driver of economic value and profit in post-industrial neoliberalism. In a recent polemic *Against Creativity*, the geographer Oli Mould suggests that the term is now so comprehensively debased by this discourse that we should abandon its use.(Mould 2018) By contrast, Harriet Hawkins points to multiple forms of creativity, suggesting a whole range of understandings of the term, beyond the narrow confines of the creative economy, indicating its significance as a ‘psychological trait and philosophical concept’ and that it is also ‘an embodied, material and social practice that produces both highly specialist cultural goods and is a part of everyday life, and it offers myriad possibilities for making alternative worlds.’(Hawkins 2017, 7) This shift towards the creativities of everyday life is important in consideration of distinctively suburban creativity. This is of course not to deny one of the key themes the collection, that the economic significance of suburban creativity has been overlooked. However, it draws attention to the importance of forms of creativity that have particular significance for suburban geographies, notably those associated with the domestic, the vernacular and the amateur. (Edensor et al. 2009; Gilbert et al. 2020)

Secondly, the uncoolhunt changes the geographies of creativity. A key theme running through this collection is about the pervasiveness of inside-out thinking, that gives priority to the creative experience and stimulus of the modern city. When we break with that thinking we can think about creativity in different ways. One such example thinks about suburban spaces as potentially creative sites. The current pandemic has highlighted the flexibility of suburban domestic space, but the role of bedrooms, garden sheds and garages as sites of invention and creativity has a history as old as suburbia itself. Suburban built forms are often more flexible, extendable and adaptable than those found in city centres. We can also think about the creative potential of suburban landscapes*.* The importance of green space has been reinforced in the pandemic, but more often than not suburban landscapes have been treated as inferior, less than either the urban or the wild. The undramatic ‘flatness’ that Greenlaw attributes to Essex is a characteristic that in various ways is often applied to suburbs and edge-lands (even those with rather hillier topography.) But if we treat suburban landscapes as not a contamination of both the urban and the rural, but as a hybrid, and a particular meeting of creative interactions between humans and nature, then we might think differently. Consider archetypal figures in the engagement with landscape – the explorer in the wilderness, the flaneur in the city, and, maybe, the gardener in the suburb. The first two figures have feet of clay, long exposed as self-heroic, masculinist and colonialist; the tedious cliches of the ‘urban explorer’ often reveal little more creativity than limitless self-obsession. If we depart from inside-out thinking, (and maybe too from an outside-in thinking that starts from the wilderness or the rural) we see a model for engaged, embodied creativity in the gardener, one that has too often been disparaged through its history, yet with its human scale, its sensitivity to climate and season, to growth and decay, and to the aesthetic and the material, has never been so significant. Beyond the garden too, there has been a cultural revaluing of in-between spaces, the landscapes of edge-lands, that can be characterised as a kind of unruly associate of more ordered suburban landscapes. In scrublands, abandoned industrial land, the remnants of older farmland and woodlands is a distinctive imaginative world that can also reward creative exploration and attention to detail.(Keiller 1999; Roberts and Farley 2012)

Finally, our uncoolhunt draws attention how we can reconfigure our understanding of creative networks and flows. This collection across its essays counteracts the expected centripetal flow of creativity associated with those coolhunting life-stories discussed above. A counterbalance to the pervasive trope of the escape from the stultifying suburb, is another kind creative escape *from* the city. This is often imagined as a retreat or artistic colony often to the sea or deep country, yet as some of the contributions to this collection show very often such moves were to sites on the margins of cities, that provided a change but not disconnection. Such creative flows and fluidity may work over a creative life-course, but may also be built into the rhythms of everyday life. The twentieth century English visionary artist Stanley Spencer is most closely associated with his home village of Cookham in Berkshire, and is often thought of a rural artist. Yet Spencer commuted into London for a significant part of his career, and was certainly not isolated from the London art scene. Spencer’s Cookham with its rail connection into London (more direct and faster than the current service) was part of an outer commuter belt, a place in the process of becoming more suburban in the mid-twentieth century. One of the key messages of this collection is to think about suburbs not as a passive ring around vibrant core cities, but as part of dynamic spatial systems with changing interconnections and flows. This has certainly been the case for the creative industries, but we can also track the changing patterns of other dimensions of creativity.

The pandemic has revealed the limits of urban cool, but that re-evaluation was perhaps already well underway. While some moves from the cities may be temporary, there are longer pressures to centralised creative activity, particularly in some of those global centres eulogised by the *Economist.* To take one example, the fashion industry is increasingly squeezed by the hypercapitalised property markets of its global centres. The kinds of cheaper inner-city districts that once provided urban interstices for young designers and independent boutiques have all but disappeared.(McRobbie 2018; Gilbert and Casadei 2020) The digital world has been shaking up the geographies of cool; Gladwell’s urban coolhunt came just before the main impact of digital media on style and influence. The rise of the digital influencer means that often it is a home space rather than the ‘street’ that is the site of style. As fashion design businesses have increasingly moved online, they have also often moved physically out of the metropolitan cores too. What this collection shows is that distinctive as the effects of digital media and pandemic are, such moves are neither without historical precedent, nor are they to places without complex, often hidden histories of creativity.

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