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A New Kind of Suburbia

Dhruv Sookhoo describes how one practice has developed and used its research



Metropolitan Workshop committed to a programme of practice-based research in 2019. As an expanding practice, a more structured approach to capturing, evaluating and disseminating the value of our work with external audiences was considered beneficial, as well as engendering a shared sense of purpose and identity across our studios in London and Dublin. Like other practices, we undertake research during the design process to define problems, drive evidence-based solutions and evaluate project outcomes, in anticipation of improved performance, demonstrated value, and professional recognition within competitive emerging markets. This is reflected in on-going research and dissemination about methods of construction and new models of home ownership, in collaboration with leading practices and universities.

Our first project *A New Kind of Suburbia* sought to learn from our growing portfolio of suburban housing projects and reflect on future directions in suburban design and development. While research goals for this project cannot be separated from the commercial interests of our practice and our collaborators, the motivation for conducting what became a complex research project was multifaceted. At its most ambiguous, it was a vehicle for reflection to enhance our work as architects, urban designers, and researchers. We envisaged our research programme as a dialogue between designers, developers and policy-makers, intended to refine our long-term thinking and doing, in relation to emerging and pertinent practice topics. We intended *A New Kind of Suburbia* to offer room to think more deeply about our

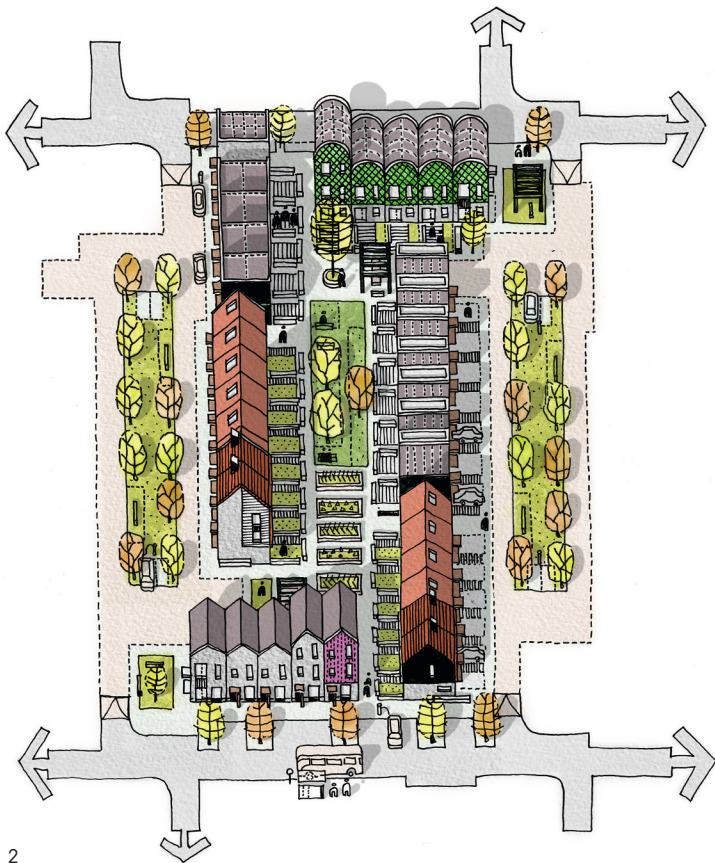
shared work with collaborators in relation to suburban place-making, and by doing so enrich our creative endeavour within the practice.

More concretely, we recognised that while most people in the UK continue to live in suburban places, suburbia is poorly defined and the varied experiences and aspirations of suburbanites are commonly taken for granted by the housing market. We anticipated that we would better understand the challenges faced by existing and new suburban residents and be well positioned to create design-led responses that harness social and technological innovations to improve residents' quality of life.

RESEARCH DESIGN FOR PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

Free from the constraints of academic settings, research practitioners can pursue pertinent research questions not envisaged at the outset at a pace determined by their employer. Practice-based research is liberated from funding applications, reporting requirements,

1 *A New Kind of Suburbia*, Postcard by Metropolitan Workshop



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and formalised peer-review against pre-defined concepts of research quality. This enables practitioners to prioritise forms of research and dissemination that have meaning to their practice. However, the flexibility of operating outside conventional research processes creates specific challenges. While a detailed exploration of how to manage research procedure and quality within a practice setting are beyond the scope of this article, it is useful to look at how we selected research methods to direct our inquiry, assemble and generate pertinent cases and perspectives, and integrate the analysis of elements to form a coherent whole. Without external constraints, self-initiated practice-based research has the potential to drift, particularly when the practice is busy, the process generates interesting opportunities for collaboration with new and existing partners, and the distinction between research and everyday practice is experienced in a productive blur.

In *A New Kind of Suburbia*, we adopted multiple qualitative methods of data generation and analysis, including:

- case studies prepared by the practice and exemplar projects by others, to explore what constitutes good quality suburban development and how to achieve it;
- participatory methods with industry experts, such as exhibitions and focus groups, intended to enhance analysis by introducing different perspectives, particularly in relation to emerging social needs; and
- interviews with industry experts and members of the practice, enabling participants to reflect on their formative experiences of suburbia and their ambitions for existing and future suburban places.

An important consideration in selecting these methods was to ensure that everyone within the practice and external contributors could participate in the research project without requiring research training. However, to fulfil our professional development objectives we collected data by means familiar to practitioners, while offering guidelines to enable deeper, structured reflection on practice and its outcomes. The project deliberately emphasised the value of different perspectives and experiences as creators and residents of suburban places.

The most interesting of the methods used was to invite practice members to submit auto-ethnographic accounts of their experiences of suburban development. Their experiences were used to explore the architect as suburban resident, and reflect on how their aspirations for suburban places translated into their professional work. A small project team coordinated and analysed individual contributions; they were supported by studio members who produced practice publications and mounted exhibitions to act as primers for participatory events.

Through our London studio we held an exhibition and invited responses from industry experts, as a starting point for a stimulating and wide-ranging round table of practitioners and academics with an interest in suburbia, its challenges and the future of its design, development, construction and use. Our Dublin studio developed a condensed and complementary project exploring the suburban experience and future opportunities for suburban residents in the Republic of Ireland.

A New Kind of Suburbia generated a large amount of rich and varied data, still under analysis. A series of case studies prepared by long-standing members of the practice revealed the significance of a new concept, the Homestead, in their understanding of suburban design quality, and how they aim to manage design considerations during the place-making process to achieve quality in collaboration with practitioners and communities. The Homestead is freely discussed by the practice to communicate general ideals, but the value of the research process was in demonstrating its site-specific application and its perceived value in different contexts. Uncovering this implicit practice knowledge and making it accessible was beneficial for our development, as it enabled new studio members to understand a concept frequently adopted in projects.

Within the research project, communicating knowledge embodied within the Homestead enabled invited experts to scrutinise its usefulness, propose refinements and recommend new ways to harness its underlying capabilities. While the Homestead was envisaged as an adaptable development framework to structure responses to new suburban communities, experts saw its value in considering how best to plan for intensification, integrate new infrastructure and uses, and bring rigour to proposals for the formation and stewardship of communal green spaces.

UNDERSTANDING THE HOMESTEAD IN USE

Our starting point was our experience of the design process and its outcomes through our built projects and design artefacts (i.e. drawings, models, planning

2 The Homestead concept adapted for Engie



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documents, samples). Studio leaders assembled practice case studies from competition submissions, commissioned masterplans, and completed projects that they felt best demonstrated Metropolitan Workshop's thinking in relation to suburban design and development.

New to the practice, what became apparent to me was the role that previous research undertaken by the practice played in framing perspectives on enhanced suburban design. In 2013, the practice successfully competed in a RIBA ideas competition sponsored by The Wates Group, which sought new typologies capable of offering flexible homes and neighbourhoods to meet the long-term aspirations of those privately renting. In response, the practice proposed the Homestead, as an adaptable unit of development that arranges a variety of interchangeable house types around shared green space, including communal gardens and allotments.

The Homestead aimed to create a new type of suburban development, efficient in form, responsive to changing market conditions in relation to density, typology and tenure mix, and capable of optimising private and public space to enhance the public realm. It was hoped that these characteristics would engender a sense of belonging, and offer homes and neighbourhoods in which people could live independently for longer, in healthier, familiar environments. When first envisaged, it translated the concept of the urban block into a suburban setting, and used it to evaluate and challenge conventional suburban development processes and the often poor opportunities offered to residents. However, its lasting value has been:

- as a thinking tool to create a shared understanding between studio members;
- to help to articulate collective aspirations for suburban places; and,
- to enable their participation in decision-making by identifying the fundamental design dimensions.

As a precedent, the Homestead acts as an ideal against which to evaluate challenges and seize new opportunities when designing new suburban communities. At a conceptual level, the Homestead has recently offered a robust basis for the development of a design guide and specification for Engie, an energy company concentrating on the generation and supply of low carbon energy, services and regeneration. This design guidance proposes a new suite of modular homes, compatible with a range of modern methods of construction, offering a high degree of customisation, and able to effectively integrate smart



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The Homestead is a vehicle to coordinate and purposefully vary house types, altering density and tenure mixes, and to enable site optimisation at different scales

infrastructure to ensure that homeowners benefit from affordable, lower carbon energy. This commitment to construction innovation was a direct response to a growing awareness of the poor design and build quality common in the speculative suburban housing sector.

The Homestead is also a vehicle to coordinate and purposefully vary house types, altering density and tenure mixes, and to enable site optimisation at different scales. This clarity is intended to support developers to undertake accurate appraisals, account for design changes, and importantly estimate the management costs necessary to realise and sustain the public realm and secure Engie's vision for active green neighbourhoods.

The inherent risk with any scalable development solution is that if applied indifferently to the nuances of context, it may reduce the benefits envisaged for local communities. However, the Homestead has proven adaptability in new settings; the transparency it gives enables discussions about how to manage basic design parameters and ensure contextual appropriateness, while encouraging variation with masterplans to be delivered in phases by different architects.

At Mayfield, a proposal for a new market town for 20,000 people in Mid-Sussex, the Homestead was adapted into different configurations, with increasing densities towards the proposed town

3 Mayfields, Mid-Sussex. Homestead adapted for a new market town.

4 Swindon: Oakfield Village, Nationwide's first housing development; view from the park



centre. The masterplan offered an opportunity to examine the robustness of the Homestead concept within a rural setting, characterised by the Weald's agricultural buildings, ancient woodland, hedgerows, lanes, and bridleways. The practice reimagined the suburban Homestead as a rural Wealden Farmstead, grouping detached, semi-detached and terraced houses and apartments around a communal garden like vernacular typologies.

At Oakfield Village, Swindon, the Homestead informed the creation of a walkable neighbourhood, and offered a visual means of explaining the character of the place to future residents during community participation. Similarly, at Campbell Park North in Milton Keynes, the Homestead was used as a concept to interpret local planning policy for homes to be set within varied parklands, and manage house type variation.

An early outcome of the research project was to clarify the underlying design principles that the Homestead embodied, including:

- creating characterful places based on variety
- balancing neighbourliness with ownership through shared amenity, with an understanding of the requirements of the development process, and
- promoting technological innovation.

These principles will be recognisable to those involved in design governance and masterplanning. But the value of the Homestead to our practice is that it gives form to these objectives early on by enhancing our communication with clients and communities alike. The Homestead serves as a precursor to site-specific design, and offers practical benefits such as testing generic planning policy, or structuring discussions about physical characteristics and short and longer term management considerations.

The Homestead is more than an efficient typological device. It is part of a culture of design practice rooted in the thinking and practical knowledge of longstanding collaborators and mentors. *A New Kind of Suburbia* was an invitation to new members of the practice and external partners to engage with this legacy, and to address new societal challenges.

REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

A New Kind of Suburbia is part of a continuing programme of self-initiated research, and it generated valuable lessons for future research. These include the need for sufficient time for reflection, written analysis and dissemination between forms of data generation, in order to adapt the research process in a more informed and purposeful way. For example, developing our exhibition and its accompanying paper was valuable in curating outputs and stimulating discussion with other experts. But what

we perhaps failed to recognise was that the exhibition itself was the product of several research methods, all supporting practical and theoretical perspectives on suburbanisation, housing quality and the role of the architect.

There is a tension between practice-based design cultures that value the immediacy of the visual display, and academic conventions in which written systematic analysis predominates. Put simply, as architects we prioritised delivering an exhibition capable of stimulating deliberation, and perhaps as researchers we overlooked that the exhibition, if not each exhibit, is a product of several methods.

The outputs from each method deserved detailed analysis to explore their significance for the project and its participants, and an opportunity to reflect on the value of the research overall before moving on to further data generation. The challenge for our self-initiated programme of research is to adapt research tools to our practice setting. This will enable practice members and external collaborators to participate in an informed and rigorous way, without stifling the design culture that the research programme is seeking to explore and develop. ●

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