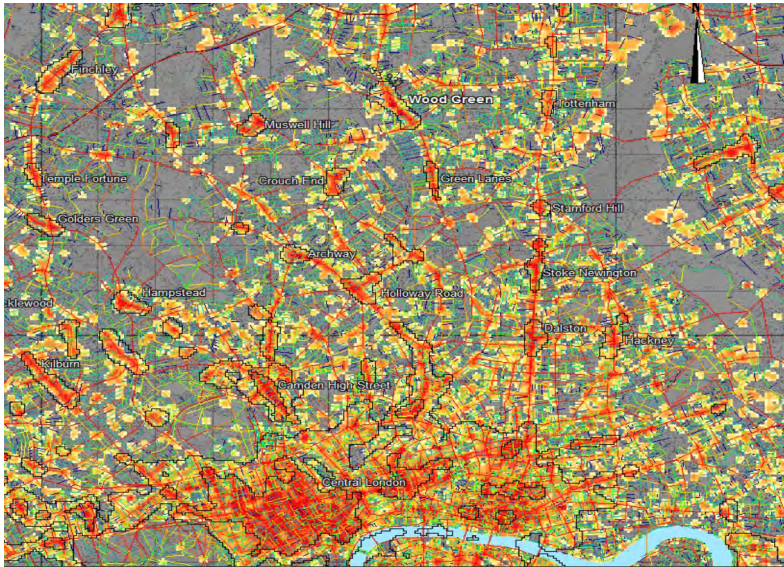




Briefing note: UCL Bartlett Adaptable Suburbs project



Space Syntax map of retail activity in central London showing retail clusters

The UK's suburbs are both overlooked and poorly understood. The word 'suburb' is not only a literal explanation of their location; it also betrays their perceived status, as places that are subordinate to the centre. Urban policy has tended to treat them simply as extensions of towns and cities, places where nothing changes, rather than as distinct entities from which we can learn important lessons about the way that cities develop and work. With their own particular and varying routes towards long-term growth and success, suburbs have important lessons to teach

Suburbs are as significant to the successful functioning of cities as the historic core or the central business district. Yet their structural role in the city organism has been examined less, and is therefore still poorly understood.

UCL's EPSRC-funded *Towards Successful Suburban Town Centres* project, which ran from 2006-9, challenged policy assumptions about suburbs and revealed that they have a great deal to teach us. Looking at 26 suburban centres in outer London – places such as Barnet and Bexleyheath, South Norwood and South Harrow, Wallington and Whetstone, seen as both unfashionable and unremarkable – the research team delivered new findings about the extent of their adaptability and resilience. The research findings made it clear that often ignored places can be models of flexible form, sustaining successful spatial networks over centuries.

Their success is based not on single, transformative, large-scale developments or high profile retail or commercial developments. Instead, it relies much more on 'invisible' spaces, such as garages and backlands and 'invisible' uses such as small business, workshops and offices. These uses are closely linked, through space syntax analysis, to street layouts that have served suburban settlements for centuries, and have been proven to encourage street activity. Combined with flexible buildings, able to accommodate changes of use, these are the basic framework for places that continue to function successfully over time. developments today. Understanding these physical success factors helps planners and designers to create sustainable developments today.

UCL's Bartlett School research team developed tools for planners to help them apply the research findings to decisions about their places. Now a 3½ year successor project is underway, building on these findings to investigate how the shape of suburbs contributes to their success.

Adaptable Suburbs is seeking to understand why the networks of street and spaces in twenty of the London suburbs already studied work well. Extensive, multi-disciplinary analysis will be used to explore the influence of social interactions and spatial movement on the economic vitality and adaptability of places. Analysis techniques will include space syntax analysis of street network accessibility. Space syntax uses computerised analysis to measure the connectedness of every street within a given place, and displays the results in a visually accessible heat map which provides an instant, detailed picture of how integrated or segregated a place is.



Adaptable Suburbs: a recent development is part of the grain in Orpington

The research team will also carry out historical analysis of the way suburbs have changed over time, looking at shifting patterns of social and economic behaviour to provide detailed context. They will carry out street-level ethnography research, interviewing the people who use and trade in each centre and mapping their perceptions of their spatial networks. Detailed town centre analysis using socio-economic data will allow the team to understand suburbs as

The extent, nature and layout of non-residential activities will be mapped at four separate points over the past two centuries to demonstrate the nature of this change. A series of local workshops will inform the development of a practical tool designed for planners to model the development trajectories of their own suburban centres, and make better informed decisions as a result.

In tough economic times, the era of large-scale, all-encompassing regeneration projects is probably over. Instead growth and positive change will come from small-scale, incremental change specific to each place, builds directly on individual strengths and assets. Our suburbs are likely to bear the brunt of housing expansion and growth pressures, in London more than anywhere else. They are also the key to reprogramming our places and achieving a more sustainable development pathway. The *Adaptable Suburbs* project will help to make small suburban neighbourhoods visible to policymakers; it will provide new information and practical understanding on how make places can be planned to work better and more sustainably; and it will make this knowledge available to local authority planners so it can be applied and used where it is needed.

The project is underway, and will complete its work in 2013. Follow progress at www.sstc.ucl.ac.uk and on Twitter at [@adaptablesuburb](https://twitter.com/adaptablesuburb). Visit the project blog at <http://uclsstc.wordpress.com/> for insights from the research team and reports from visits to suburbs.



The *Adaptable Suburbs* project at University College London is funded by a forty-two month grant from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council. Led by Laura Vaughan, Victor Buchli, Sam Griffiths, Muki Haklay and Claire Ellul, the research team has expertise in urban design, anthropology, history, geographical information science and qualitative GIS. Full details of the project are at: www.sstc.ucl.ac.uk.