Colonial suburbs (in the sense of a locale outside the settlement proper) have existed almost since the beginning of organized settlement. For much of this time colonies and suburbs were sites of exile and alienation. Both were politically and economically dependent on the metropole. And both served the same dual functions: they were places from which to import goods that could not be produced or finished within the settlement proper, and they were places to which the unwanted could be exported (criminals, heathens, pollution). Toward the end of the seventeenth century, however, the expansion of European mercantile economies and the corresponding expansion of European bourgeoisie occasioned the refinement both of colonial settlements and of suburbs into more sophisticated and purposeful instruments for the realization of specific societal practices and relations.

Suburbs in particular, instead of being unregulated sites for practices the cities found impermissible, slowly were transformed into highly desirable, detached, clearly circumscribed, exclusively residential (and generally bourgeois) enclaves. Central to this transformation was a fundamental change in the character of the relation between suburbs and cities from hierarchical to contrapositional. The positionalities of city and suburb no longer were tied to each other by simple relations of hierarchy (e.g. one locale being intrinsically superior to the other). Rather, those positionalities came to be predicated on an array of binary oppositions (e.g. commerce/domesticity, res publica/family) which gave to each locale an integrity in part defined by negation of – not subordination to – the other. Thus I use ‘contrapositional’ to refer to the distinct, and in many respects opposed, positionalities adopted by the modern suburb and city.

Throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, the further transformation of suburbs and colonial cities – and suburbs of colonial cities – served to articulate key dimensions in which European cultures were evolving: social differentiation, economic extraction and consumption, the political redefinition of property and of possessive individualism, and the aesthetic
articulation of the self. All of these dimensions are evident in the suburban growth of three colonial cities to be discussed below, Batavia, Madras, and Calcutta. But first it will be helpful to explore in more detail the role of built space in effecting social differentiation.

**SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION**

It is commonly advanced as axiomatic that colonial cities as well as suburbs in general are apparatuses, even engines, of racial segregation. In many cases, this presumption is wrong, for it mistakes a sometime effect for a fundamental principle: race was by no means the sole or primary axis along which space was divided. In many cases, such as suburbs of Batavia or Singapore, Chinese bourgeois households were intermingled with those of Europeans. Likewise for at least the first sixty years of English settlement in Calcutta, European businesses and residences could be found spread throughout all sectors of the city; only after the battle of Plassey (1757) and subsequent intensification of economic and political pressure on the East India Company could explicit patterns of racial segregation be demarcated.

A more effective way of approaching the problem of segregation—and one that by no means discounts its widespread presence—is to approach all inhabited spaces, urban and suburban, metropolitan and colonial, as necessarily being instruments of social differentiation. They are necessarily so because human society never has functioned, and probably never could, without multiple dimensions of differentiation. The particular manner in which any culture, group, or individual configures space not only serves as a cognitive anchor of those dimensions, but also is instrumental in their facilitation and maintenance.

The flip side of difference is homogeneity. As Foucault recognized in his essay on heterotopia, space not only institutionalizes difference; it simultaneously provides for locales where sameness and likeness are reinforced. Differentiation, moreover, occurs in part by condensing and concentrating certain common characteristics of various social groups and fractions. As part of this process, differentiation according to such characteristics as gender, caste, race, ethnicity, occupation, religion, and citizenship comes to be institutionalized in the culture through spatial and architectural means.

Early in the nineteenth century, belief in the efficacy of exploiting certain degrees of differentiation for economic and political purposes was fundamental to the design of colonial cities as well as suburbs. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles's 1822 plan for Singapore is an archetypal example of a city where particular sectors were designated for specific functions and population groups (Figure 1.1). Not long afterward John Claudius Loudon, in his epitome of suburban design, *The Suburban Gardener, and Villa Companion* (1838), took for granted the need for homogeneity within such sectors. Speaking of residential enclaves adjacent to metropolitan cities, he lauded those in which 'the houses and inhabitants are all, or chiefly, of the same description and class as the house we intend to inhabit, and as ourselves'.

In Singapore as well as in the English suburbs that mushroomed in the decades following Loudon's treatise, as in virtually every built space, the axes of differentiation were complex and multiple. Among the axes that are relevant to the discussion of colonial cities, and metropolitan and colonial suburbs, four stand out most prominently. First are the parallel distinctions between metropolitan and peripheral, and between urban and sub-urban. Both rely on the constructed notion that certain highly privileged activities (e.g., finance, legislation, 'culture') are located in the hub or core, while other sorts of activities that are beneath or beyond the scope of the core are relegated to the margins. Thus the original sense of 'suburb' in English connoted an area in which noxious, dangerous, and illicit activities occurred. Yet the eighteenth-century inversion of the term into something with very positive connotations still retained the sense of oppositionality to the core, pitting suburban aesthetic pleasure, leisure, and virtue against metropolitan politics, business, and corruption.

Second is the axis of collective identity. The different quarters that were reserved for different ethnicities in Singapore, although not wholly residential enclaves, announced a function in many respects like the suburban locales that Loudon described, where elements of the same description and class would be concentrated. In both cases, the reservation of a specific locale for specific elements would provide for the spatial definition and support of an identity that would be seen as distinct in relation to other, differently configured portions of the city or its dependencies. The point is not only the construction of a common, homogeneous identity; it also is the differentiation of that identity from all other groups.

The third axis is the distinction of elite from non-elite. A site detached from the urban centre can be highly effective for the construction of status and prestige, since it distinguishes the site-holder as above or beyond standard constraints and rules. Examples range from ancient Roman and Italian Renaissance villas to modern-day gated enclaves. In the case of colonial cities the same axis of distinction existed, but the poles were reversed. The European metropole was
the centre of fashion learning, art, privilege, and power, characteristics embedded everywhere in its architecture, its public spaces, its interior and exterior furnishings, its theatres, the dress of its people, and so forth. The colony, then, was articulated spatially not in terms of the local idiom, but rather in terms (such as neoclassical architecture) that betokened its fealty to the centre, terms that concomitantly confirmed its provincial character. This was necessarily so: any divergence from this relation would have been inconsistent with — indeed a threat to — the enforced political and economic dependency of the colony.

Finally, and by no means least, the fourth axis differentiates leisure from productive labour, a distinction that became increasingly pertinent in the eighteenth century as capital began to supplant both labour and land as an instrument for the production of wealth, status, authority, and power. Country estates from the time of ancient Rome to seventeenth-century England were, as a rule, productive working estates: they raised crops and animals, and even manufactured certain goods, for the use of the household and for export. The first decades of the eighteenth century, by contrast, saw the rise of exclusively residential villa enclaves on the outskirts of London. What distinguished these enclaves, and especially the individual estates within them, was their explicit lack of productivity. Landscapes were tailored for aesthetic contemplation, for showy luxuriance, or for sport but above all were constructed as sites of leisure. Indeed such sites, with their manifest evocations of Arcadian plenty-without-labour, became in effect the figure in which the identity of the owner was constructed: man of leisure, unaffected by pressure of time, money, or politics, and clearly dissociated from the material constraints and pressures of the city. In the case of colonial settlements, a comparable axis obtained between colony and metropole, but once again with poles reversed: colonial cities were expected to be centres of production and extraction, revenues from which would be sent to Europe for purposes of leisure and consumption.

**BATAVIA**

The Dutch forcibly established Batavia (Jakarta) in 1619 as the headquarters for the Indies of the Dutch East India Company. The first century of Batavia's existence under Dutch control also was the century during which Amsterdam enjoyed pre-eminence as a burgeoning centre of global trade. Thus it is perhaps to be expected that Batavia, lying like Amsterdam on a low, flat, ill-drained plain,
would be developed by the Dutch according to a system of canals and polders similar to that which had proved so successful at home (Figure 1.2). Unlike the British at Madras (established 1639), the Dutch provided adequate room in their original city plan not only for administration, defence, worship, and some trading enterprises, but also for many decades’ expansion of manufacturing, retailing, and residential sectors for Europeans and some non-European groups. Still, from an early date some non-European populations were excluded from the city proper and required to settle on the outskirts in their own enclaves, or kampongs. By the end of the seventeenth century such areas were commonly known as the ‘suburbs’ of Batavia, a usage that still retained Renaissance European connotations of subordination and inferiority.

Expansion of Batavia from the mid seventeenth to mid eighteenth century generally occurred according to three distinct spatial patterns. All of these were in some respect ‘suburban’ in that they involved discrete locales close to the city proper, the locales and their inhabitants were economically and socially tied to the city, and each locale exhibited a certain uniformity, being dedicated to a single category of people and/or a single use. On the other hand, these locales were not entirely suburban, at least in the modern sense of the term, for one cardinal reason: in most respects their relation to the centre remained hierarchical rather than contrapositional.

**Non-European ‘Kampongs’ or ‘Kwartiers’**

Even before the forcible occupation of the site of Batavia by the Dutch, the Javanese settlement of Jacatra (which the Dutch destroyed) was surrounded by several Javanese kampongs and at least one Chinese kampong. To the extent that these did not interfere with Dutch plans for laying out Batavia, they were allowed to remain, since they continued to provide a source of much-needed food and other provisions. But the Dutch remained mistrustful of the Javanese. Concerned primarily to manage a secure administrative centre and trading station, not an entire city, the Dutch prohibited Javanese from living in Batavia proper. This consequently effected a crucial difference from the state of affairs before the Dutch arrival: economically and politically the Javanese kampongs had become subsidiary elements of a private trading enterprise, their existence being suffered only to the extent that it was conducive to the economic goals of the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or Dutch East India Company).

In the case of the Chinese population, the situation was different for some time. As Leonard Blussé has shown, a considerable portion of the success of Batavia was due to the entrepreneurial efforts of the Chinese, whom the Dutch necessarily allowed to reside in the city proper. All this changed in 1740, however, when an insurrection of Chinese peasants from outlying areas precipitated carnage within the city walls. Thereafter, the Chinese were banished, and concentrated in an area immediately south-west of the city known as Glodok, which remains today the Chinese quarter of Jakarta. As with Javanese, Ambonese, and other non-European ‘Kwartiers’, all clearly differentiated from the Dutch city proper, this dispersion of the population into ethnically defined settlements articulated in material terms the primacy of the Dutch colonial economic enterprise, which remained fundamentally oriented toward extraction, not development.
One of Batavia’s principal functions, as a major entrepot, was the resupply of all military and commercial vessels that called. Although the economy of the region was probably well above subsistence levels prior to the arrival of the Dutch, the ongoing need to provision large fleets clearly exceeded local production, efforts to increase which soon became necessary. The process began with draining and reclaiming tracts of land around the city’s perimeter in a manner quite similar to the way in which Dutch polders had been reclaimed since the twelfth century. The physical circumstances were quite similar: the land all across the surrounding plain was described as flat, marshy, and subject to flooding, as with areas in the Netherlands that had been reclaimed. The Dutch therefore did what they did at home: beginning with areas immediately adjacent to the eastern and western flanks of the city, they marked out narrow strips of land perpendicular to existing canals, and then cut drains along the sides of those strips. Earth dug from the drains could then be used to raise the level of the land in between. Maps as early as 1650 indicate that substantial swaths of land facing the city’s eastern and western perimeters were thus laid out, and then subdivided into smaller fields for different varieties of crops. Although some maps show dwellings here, of a scale suggesting bourgeois splendour, they were in all likelihood only farmhouses and barns. Indeed these reclaimed areas were suburban in only the same, subordinate sense as the kampung or kwartiers: they were subsidiary spaces satisfying a specific economic need of the city proper.

**European Radial Dispersion**

The third manner in which Batavia grew, unlike the first two, was not so neatly confined to specific quarters or tracts. Rather, it was a process of radial dispersion along canals and rivers leading west, south, south-east, and east toward forts the Dutch had erected to protect the lands surrounding the city. These forts – Angke, Rijswijk, Noordwijk, Jacatra, and Ancol, already prominently indicated on Johannes Nieuhof’s map of 1682 – were located two to four miles outside the city, and stood watch over extensive rice fields and lands for grazing cattle. In the direction of the two southern forts, Rijswijk and Noordwijk, the principal thoroughfare was, at least for the seventeenth century, a canal. Begun in 1648 by a Chinese entrepreneur, Phoa Bingam, and originally intended for floating timber down to the harbour and shipyards, the Molenvliet was the principal corridor south of the city for about two and a half miles, where it made water connections with the two forts. But the Molenvliet and the corresponding corridor leading eastward to Ancol soon became more than routes for goods and defence. In part because these were the principal means of travel through this low and marshy landscape, and in part because of the security provided by the forts and the city at either end, these routes also became the prime location for VOC officials and wealthy traders to establish their country residences, or buitenplaatsen (literally, ‘sites outside’ the city proper). These were not country ‘seats’ in the English sense of the term – landed estates that served as a base of economic and political security apart from the metropolis. Rather, their existence and utility were wholly dependent on their owners’ engagement in the administration and trade of the city.

Maps from the first part of the eighteenth century, such as Homann’s map of 1733 or Heydt’s as published in 1744 (Figure 1.3), show the landscape beyond the city proper to be sparsely inhabited, given over primarily to paper and powder mills, rice fields, plantations, and meadows. Still, isolated country retreats had begun to appear in the vicinity of Batavia as early as the 1620s. By the middle of the seventeenth century a few estates and gardens appeared along the way to Ancol and upriver toward Jacatra, retreats that would have been used for occasional daily outings. Yet it was still unsafe to stay overnight. By the early eighteenth century the pattern of usage had begun to change toward continuous occupation of outlying residences. In 1706, for example, the Dutch painter Cornelis de Bruin was presented to the former governor-general, Willem van Outshoorn, who was living in retirement in a ‘villa situated a little distance from the town’. And beginning in the 1720s the pattern of settlement became more consistent: the landscape was slowly transformed into several continuous strips of bourgeois habitations, particularly along the corridors from the city to the several forts.

In the 1760s the artist Johannes Rach began a series of drawings of the city and its environs, and his work shows the banks of the Molenvliet and the Ciliwung (which led toward the Jacatra fort) lined with bourgeois dwellings set in elegantly landscaped garden plots. Few such dwelling sites were productive estates, and in many cases the entire site was given over to formal landscaping. As in the case of modern suburbs, productive agricultural land had been subdivided and re-landscaped for purposes of leisure and aesthetic enjoyment. One of the more imposing sites, the house and garden of Jan Schreuder, Councillor Extraordinary and Governor and Director of Ceylon (Figure 1.4), occupied the land between
a bend in the Ciliwung river and the road to the Jacatra fort. The plan clearly shows elegant formal parterres fronting the villa, and a matrix of lawns, formal walks, and drives leading toward stables, several garden pavilions, and the river. Rach's views of other houses in this vicinity and along the Molenvliet portray a series of comparable villa estates, each fronted by elaborate plantings, topiary, sculpture, and ornate fences, in effect constituting the flanks of elegant boulevards radiating out from the city (Figure 1.5). The agricultural, commercial, and defensive character of these corridors had been altered, at least over substantial segments, to become locales dedicated to recreation, entertainment, leisure, and retreat.

The number and opulence of these estates also bespoke much broader changes in the economic and political landscape. Well into the eighteenth century the territory surrounding Batavia had been regarded as unsafe for continuous
habitation because of the threat of incursions by Javanese or Chinese from outside the vicinity, and even the threat of raids by escaped slaves who lived in the nearby jungle. A clear relation obtained between Batavia and the surrounding territory. The fortified town served as the European redoubt, an instrument for the implementation of colonial jurisdiction and trade. The ommelanden — the surrounding lands with their various kampongs, fields, and plantations, largely controlled by non-Europeans — were alien and threatening. By the mid to late eighteenth century, however, these relations increasingly were overwritten by a new, more complex matrix. The proliferation of domestic retreats along certain corridors leading away from the town, in many respects, the leading edge of this change. As more jungle was cleared, and as the prosperity and influence of the trading settlement extended further across the region, it became safer not only to build houses outside the town fortifications, but also to live in them on a regular basis. By the late eighteenth century, those who could afford to do so increasingly lived outside the town and commuted in daily. By the early nineteenth century, rush hour was a daily ordeal: as G. F. Davidson observed in the early 1820s,

From four to five o’clock every evening, the road leading from the town to the suburbs is thronged with vehicles of all descriptions, conveying the merchants from their counting-houses to their country or suburban residences, where they remain till nine o’clock the next morning.

The consequences of this spatial shift were considerable: the town was progressively reduced to an economic and administrative centre, inhabited only by the least privileged strata, while outside the city new tracts of elite and bourgeois dwellings flourished. The relation between redoubt and alien territory had been inverted: the town itself was alien territory, for the elite to occupy as briefly as possible while doing business, and then to be abandoned every night. And the relation between the suburban tracts of European dwellings and the ommelanden became even more acutely problematic: arrayed along a few major routes, adjacent to or facing each other, European residences ignored the surrounding landscape, its economy, and its peoples. Even though the town still presented a wary, defensive façade to the surrounding territory, the European residential enclaves, in order to perfect their illusion of an Arcadian setting, concertedly had to ignore it.

The corridor-enclaves of European houses along the Jacatra road and the Molenvliet were, as yet, not altogether suburbs. The actual roads and canals, however elegantly bordered by topiary and ornamental fencing, remained important and no doubt busy thoroughfares for people and goods. The houses
were not, as yet, isolated from commerce in a detached, wholly residential setting. Such a wholesale suburbanization of Batavia was only achieved early in the nineteenth century, when the city’s administrative apparatus was entirely relocated to Weltevreden, a site close to the end of the Jacatra road. Governor Daendels concentrated administrative and military facilities around an open square subsequently named the Waterlooplein. Just to the west, there developed a detached European residential quarter surrounding the vast, pastoral expanse of the Koningsplein. Daendels was unable to complete his building campaign owing to the arrival of the British in 1811, but the site was cast for a tripartite segmentation of the Batavian landscape: Europeans had now altogether abandoned the town proper except as a centre of finance and trade; civil and military government was concentrated at Weltevreden; and a residential quarter, focused inward on the broad expanse of the Koningsplein – not unlike the manner in which terraces surrounded Regent’s Park in contemporary London – now was isolated by itself in suburban natural splendour.

**MADRAS**

A full history of modern Anglo-American suburbia has yet to be written, particularly with respect to its articulation of specific new modes of architectural and spatial organization that helped to define and advance emerging forms of bourgeois consciousness. The suburbanization of Madras constitutes a chapter in that history, but the story begins early in the eighteenth century with a concentration of houses in the Thames Valley, west of London in the general vicinity of Richmond. A good number were of diminutive size compared to other ‘retreats’ in the vicinity, a quality emphasized by introduction of the term ‘villa’ to describe them. But the most distinctive characteristic of these dwellings was that they were architecturally suited for little other than leisure pursuits. They were sited on parcels of land too small for the production of significant revenue through any form of husbandry, and in most cases the grounds were landscapes in a manifestly uneconomic manner according to the aesthetic conventions of the period. Located at a sufficient distance from London that the proprietors could feel wholly disconnected from the city – though necessarily they remained politically and economically quite connected – they were close enough to London that one could commute back and forth on a weekly, weekend, or even daily basis. The genesis of this and subsequent clusters of comparable dwellings cannot be explained simply as a matter of changing ‘taste’, or of geographic dispersion based on factors such as economics and transportation. Rather, it also is a matter of critical changes in English modes of consciousness at the beginning of the eighteenth century: consciousness that began to anchor identity primarily in the autonomous self rather than in a social hierarchy or collective. The suburban villa was instrumental in the construction of this consciousness: it did so, in part, by spatially differentiating private from public, by establishing the suburban plot as a site for cultivation of the self (e.g. through leisure pursuits) instead of commerce and politics.

Much the same predilection for enclaves of detached villas actually occurred simultaneously, or perhaps even earlier, in Madras. Occupied by the British since 1639, Madras quickly became the principal centre of East India Company activity in India. Though by no means the equal of Batavia, let alone London, it boasted a highly concentrated European trading centre at Fort St George, as well as adjacent quarters and villages in which indigenous populations lived and worked. And no less than in Batavia, the economic and political basis of Madras was narrowly mercantile: institutions, regulations, buildings, and personnel all were deployed for the purposes of trade and extraction. And yet the British mode of mercantile extraction differed from its Continental competitors: the British sought to be engaged as little as possible in designing or regulating the physical, financial, or political structure of their colonial settlements. Especially in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries they preferred, to the extent feasible, to adapt existing financial, mercantile, juridical, and physical structures to supply their needs.

These conditions help us understand the early appearance of suburban enclaves in the vicinity of Madras. A concentrated mercantile settlement such as the East India Company established within the limited confines of Fort St George did not provide very well for the differentiation of civic or social activities – let alone individual identities – from the narrow purposes of the Company. Certain locales for leisure activity did flourish adjacent to the Fort, within the city proper, and several are visible on the map prepared by Thomas Pitt about 1710. Most notable were the ‘Company’s Gardens’ and an array of private ‘gardens’, many of which were laid out in formal avenues and parterres, and surrounded substantial residences. The largest and most elaborate of these, encompassing as much as six or seven acres, were dispersed around the periphery of Peddumaikkenpetta, an otherwise largely built-up Indian quarter to the north-west of the Fort. Still, as the basic character of the area was Indian, the few European gardens on the perimeter were hardly able to constitute a distinct, discrete suburban locale.
But another site, with precisely those qualities, was described by Captain Alexander Hamilton, who visited Madras as early as 1707. The place he visited, some eight miles south-west of the city at the foot of St Thomas's Mount, had become a popular site for erecting 'Summer-houses where Ladies and Gentlemen retire to in the Summer, to recreate themselves, when the Business of the Town is over, and to be out of the Noise of Spungers and impertinent Visitors, whom this City is often molested with'. This site, contemporary with comparable enclaves in the Thames Valley, was configured for much the same purposes: to afford people whose business was in the city proper the opportunity to 'retire' or escape from the city's 'Business' and 'Noise' for a week, a weekend, or possibly even an afternoon or an evening. Here they could go about the business of 'recreating' – restoring, enlivening, gratifying – themselves in an explicitly anti-urban, leisured setting.  

By the 1740s European 'garden houses' had proliferated around Madras, but according to an increasingly dispersed pattern. Unlike the garden houses in Peddumaickenpetta and other parts of the city proper that were cheek by jowl with Indian properties, and unlike the isolated aggregation of garden houses at St Thomas's Mount, newer garden houses were scattered comparatively loosely within an arc of unsettled territory one to two miles south-west of the city, pointedly avoiding established Indian residential, commercial, and religious centres in the vicinity. Near Triplicane, about two miles south of the fort, a survey located some 67 garden houses as early as 1727.  

The Choultry Plain, about two miles west-south-west of the fort, soon became the most popular locale for country residences. Some of these are shown on a sketchy map of Madras made in 1746 by a French military officer, Captain Paradis (Figure 1.6). Although the map is inaccurate in many respects, it renders very effectively the mapmaker's impression of a city ringed by partly inhabited terrain, substantial portions of which have been taken over by the enclosed garden-house tracts of private individuals – private domains closed off not only from the city beyond, but also from their neighbours, indigenous settlements, major roads, and their immediate surroundings (rendered here inaccurately, but tellingly, as empty land). Following the 1748 cessation of hostilities with France, which meant that Europeans could live outside the fort in comparative safety, maps show an explosion of garden houses across the Choultry Plain, along the road to St Thomas's Mount, and then even further inland in areas due west of the Fort.

Yet by 1759 it had become official policy to discourage residential building on the Choultry Plain: the stated rationale was couched in terms of personal morality: private garden estates served 'merely to gratify the Vanity and Folly of
Mercants in having the Parade of Country Houses and Gardens. But a more
trenchant concern was the manner in which such a ‘Parade’ diminished the
‘Distinctions which belong only to our Governor and the principal persons of
Madras’. By 1769, official rhetoric had escalated: in summarily rejecting the
application of a low-level ‘Writer’ on the Company’s staff for a grant of land on
which to build, the government based its decision on the grounds that
privatization of space not only abetted moral corruption, but also diminished
productivity and threatened the public order:

the general Argument, which has been used very plausibly, Viz. That Cultivation and improvement
tend to the public Benefit, appears in the present Case to be liable to great exception. . . In the
Grants made to Europeans, the Improvements are chiefly ornamental, such as Buildings and Gardens
of Pleasure, which tend to the Encouragement of Idleness, Expend and Dissipation, the
Consequences of which, in a Colony constituted as this is, are but too obvious. 24

In other words the uppermost rank of Company officials, for whom isolated
country estates had long served as instruments of rank and distinction, sought
out and condemned as morally corrupt the class of bourgeois traders who now
were locating here as well, because the proliferation of new houses cheapened
and eroded that distinction.

And indeed some Company personnel may have construed this colonization of the
city’s peripheral space as an even more radical act. For the Choolerry Plain and
Mount Road areas, where large numbers of garden houses were concentrated, afforded the nouveaux riches more than the simple opportunity to emulate elite
privilege. Rather, these were locales where their bourgeois, mercantile identity
– both individually and as a class – could be realized. Distanced from the fort,
adjacent to no commercial or administrative centre, and occupied by a
heterogeneous class of professional and mercantile residents who pursued much
the same interests and activities as each other, these areas became prime locales
for the articulation of personal identity as independent of the Company and its
interests – precisely the sort of ‘Vanity and Folly’ the Company sought to
condemn. This was more than a threat to the status of a few high-ranking
Company officials. It amounted to the creation of an instrument by which
Europeans (and, increasingly, Indians) could anchor and legitimate their economic and political interests as private entrepreneurs apart and distinct from the interests of the Company, which remained confined to the Fort.

Less than two decades later the transformation of Madras into a suburban
society was undeniable. Louis de Grandpré, visiting in 1789, indicated that the
White Town had been reduced to a business and administrative quarter, deserted
at night by a commuting population that resided in the suburbs. 25 Estimates of the
number of garden houses in the Choolerry Plain ranged upwards of two hundred
as early as 1780. By the early nineteenth century, over four hundred could be
counted in a broad swath south and west of the fort. 26

Early nineteenth-century accounts confirm the twin processes of condensation and
expansion by which production and trade remained concentrated in the Black
Town and adjacent areas, and administration and finance took over Fort St
George, while traders, financiers, officials, and other professionals and entrepren
ers and Indian and European alike, continued to lay out enclaves of private
residential compounds around the south-western, western, and north-western
perimeter of the city. And in all of these enclaves, residents continued to
emphasize the spatial construction of personal privacy. Visiting in 1804, Lord
Volanta remarked on the consistency with which individuals screened out
awareness of each other. Unlike Calcutta, he said, Madras has

no European town, except a few houses, which are chiefly used as warehouses in the fort. The
gentlemen of the settlement live entirely in their garden-houses, as they very properly call them;
for these are all surrounded by gardens, so closely planted, that the neighbouring house is rarely
visible. Choolerry Plain . . . is now covered by these peaceful habitations, which have changed a
barren sand into a beautiful scene of vegetation. 27

Another visitor’s account of 1811 made it explicit that isolated, detached
residences in a ‘garden’ setting had become paradigmatic of European life in
Madras (Figure 1.7). Not only was it unfashionable to live in the town itself, but the
garden house was a necessary instrument for the contrapositional constitution of self and family as domestic counterparts to the toll and commerce of the city.
Some Europeans had shops, counting-houses, or even residences in the vicinity of the Black Town:

but for a family residence, it is quite unfashionable, these being all two or three miles distant, and
called Garden Houses. . . . The appropriate mansions of familiar intercourse are the garden-houses, so
called from being situated more in the country amid trees, flowers, gardens, and all the other
attendants on rural life. . . . The merchant, fatigued with the labours of the day in the [counting]-
house, retires hither at four or five o’clock, to rest for the evening, in the bosom of his family. 28

As Susan Neild Basu has well demonstrated, the suburbanization of Madras
generally did not occur at the expense of indigenous villages or temple sites. Rather, garden compounds screened themselves from nearby settlements, and
even were served by a largely separate road network. Thus suburbs and indigenous
settlements existed in separate social and spatial systems. 29 In part this can be
understood on the basis of economics: purchasing uninhabited land is cheaper than taking over existing settlements. In part it can be understood as ethnic or even class prejudice. But also it needs to be understood in terms of the desire to configure space to sustain retreat, ‘retirement’, recreation, leisure, and other conditions necessary to the constitution of the private self. Thus the importance of screening out both indigenous settlements and European neighbours: creating a road system on which indigenous commerce would have little occasion to travel correspondingly sustains the apparent setting of private, Arcadian leisure.

The suburbanization of Calcutta was delayed, necessarily, until after the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the consequent assumption by the British of administrative control over Bengal. Before Plassey, British commercial interests were concentrated in and around the original Fort William, built on the bank of the River Hooghly at approximately the site where Job Charnock had established his East India Company trading settlement in 1690. The British generally resided in Fort William and its immediate vicinity, though individual European gardens and garden houses could be found at various locations within a three-mile radius, including in the portion of the city subsequently known as the ‘Black Town’.

After Plassey, however, as administrative control of Bengal and eventually all of India was concentrated in Calcutta, and as Calcutta rose to economic primacy as the East India Company’s chief station in India, British residential patterns changed significantly. With the completion in 1773 of the new Fort William and its vast surrounding esplanade south of the established city centre, large new tracts of land to the east, south, and south-west not only became far more accessible to the city, but also came under direct military protection (Figure 1.8). A 1780-4 survey of this area by Captain Mark Wood shows well over a dozen large residential estates landscaped in European style with formal parterres, allées of trees, and the like. Wood’s depiction of a large number of ‘tanks’ (reservoirs) and indigenous place names indicates that most European estates were interspersed quite closely among indigenous settlements. Thus it would be hard to characterize the European estates as yet forming an enclave. Indeed the landscaping of the grounds and the orientation of the approach roads represented efforts to assert the independence, even the obliviousness, of each with respect to the other.

A decade later, however, the scale and orientation of dwellings in the area immediately east of the Esplanade had been radically transformed (Figure 1.9). Aaron Upjohn’s map of 1792–3 shows that traces of a few large estates remained, but that they now were crowded by dozens of much smaller houses, on very compact sites, each of which was (or soon would be) enclosed in its own walled compound. This area, divided into ‘Chouringhy’ and ‘Dhee Birjee’ on Upjohn’s map according to local nomenclature, but soon to be called just Chowringhee, quickly became the principal European residential quarter of Calcutta.

Although it was adjacent to the city’s administrative and commercial centre, which lay along the northern boundary of the Esplanade, Chowringhee remained distinctly residential. Its inhabitants commuted to work daily, a distance of half a
mile to two and a half miles, and at other times made use of the drives around
and across the Esplanade for leisure activities such as promenading and, eventually,
horse racing.

Over the next three decades nearly all of Chowringhee became covered with

residential compounds, each of which typically encompassed three-fourths of an
acre to three acres (Figure 1.10). Ordinarily the house stood isolated in the centre
of the compound. The perimeter of the compound was walled, both for privacy
and for security. Ranges of sheds for servants, cooking, and equipment storage
lined the insides of the walls. Otherwise the grounds were kept completely
cleared as a way of improving ventilation – not only for reasons of comfort, but
also to minimize the accumulation of 'miasmatic' vapours that supposedly were
conducive to disease.

Unlike Batavia's radial dispersion along narrow transportation corridors, or
Madras's loose enclaves of garden estates, house compounds in Chowringhee did
coaalesce into a distinct and discrete, predominantly residential, quarter. At the
same time, Chowringhee inverted the standard European spatial paradigm: instead
of architectural ensembles linked to each other and to streets, squares, and plazas, each compound articulated its own autonomy; streets were fronted by blank walls, and dwellings faced only the interiors of their own compounds. Indeed Chowringhee may well have antedated the appearance of comparable suburban tracts in Britain. Instances there of bourgeois residences arrayed in detached, well-defined enclaves actually postdate the situation in Chowringhee as shown on Upjohn’s map.¹⁰

By the 1790s most Europeans who would make vast fortunes in India, the ‘nabobs’, already had returned home. They had established a precedent and a pattern, however, of using their time, position, and influence as Company officials to amass great fortunes and enhance their personal status. Although a variety of political and economic factors limited the ability of following generations to match this level of wealth and splendour, they managed to succeed on a somewhat lesser scale. In Calcutta, the spatial articulation of Chowringhee was both a product and an instrument of this success, in at least four respects – all of which have been integral to the development of the modern suburb. First and foremost, Chowringhee was a locale distinct and apart from – indeed contrapositional to – the business and administrative centre. It provided those who lived there a spatial anchor for the construction of an identity or persona that differentiated itself from the political-economic nexus and instead celebrated the autonomy of the self. Second, the houses’ isolation within the open spaces of their compounds served to articulate a concept of personal prestige based not only on an implied opposition to politics and commerce, but even on dissociation and detachment from other such individuals. Third, the huge scale and ponderous neoclassical ornament of these houses, together with the manner in which they dominated the scores of servants whose huts were pressed against the compounds’ perimeters, bespoke an ongoing, progressive effort to redefine the seat of authority, detaching it from the purview of the Company and situating it instead in the domain of private individuals. And finally, all of these factors contributed to an ever more refined spatial articulation of the rise of economic individualism. The private compounds of Chowringhee not only represented, but actively facilitated, a new positionality for bourgeois personnel. Presenting themselves no longer as Company ‘Servants’, but instead as private agents concerned with the personal appropriation of wealth, their suburban Chowringhee residences served as instruments not only for protection and legitimation of that wealth, but also for its enjoyment and consumption.¹¹
CONCLUSION: THE SPACES OF MODERNITY

The three case studies introduced above exemplify the double dimension in which the suburb, starting in the early eighteenth century, began to articulate the spaces of modernity. First, it provided a site for establishing a new, contrapositional – anti-urban – mode of relation to the city proper. And second, it afforded sites whose principal raison d'être was the establishment and augmentation of a person's individual identity. No longer was the suburb simply terrain for whatever the city cared to reject; no longer was the city the singular spatial criterion for civilized identity. Rather, the suburb became a site for realizing and legitimating criteria of equal but opposite force. Eighteenth-century European thought had begun to articulate some of the fundamental polarities of modern Western culture – subject/object (or mind/body), public/private, masculine/feminine, etc. – but such distinctions had no more than putative existence until they could be realized in the material domain of everyday life. Such changes of course occurred in many dimensions, ranging from economic relations and legal codes to dress and demeanour, to artistic and leisure pursuits. Yet in many respects the most durable medium for institutionalizing such binary distinctions – and therefore a powerful instrument for sustaining and perpetuating those relations – is the material, physical space that defines the parameters of everyone’s personal and social activity.

Since the eighteenth century, suburbs have afforded a premier locale for the material articulation of such binary distinctions. In colonial Batavia, Madras, or Calcutta, just as ever since throughout Europe, America, and Australia, suburbs became instruments crucial to the subversion of economic and social hierarchies. On the one hand, the newfound commercial and spatial autonomy of private traders progressively subverted the state-sanctioned centralized mercantile authority of companies such as the VOC or the East India Company. And on the other hand, so were the domain and domain of polis and commune subverted by provision of a site that was socially, legally, and literally beyond the pale – i.e. in some measure outside the mercantile, military, or municipal authority. Bourgeois individuals could sustain their enterprise and their identity from sites that now were construed as economically and socially distinct from the city – i.e. opposed, not subordinate, to it.

This was especially feasible in a colonial setting, since in many respects those who settled outside a ‘Fort’ and its immediate precincts were occupying not so much a subordinate locale, in the manner of lands surrounding European feudal cities, but rather a locale already demarcated as alien to the city, in the sense that it was part of the indigenous, non-European landscape. Such a locale provided a perfect basis for construction of a modern bourgeois identity. Alienated in terms of wealth and privilege from the surrounding indigenous population, and in economic and social terms from the urban centre of authority and production, the individual built an estate or compound that architecturally celebrated that alienation – even though in other, now hidden, respects the individual remained inextricably dependent on both the city and its hinterlands. That celebration of individual alienation – no small component of modern liberal ‘individualism’ – still remains a critical element of the modern suburban landscape.

NOTES

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2 I am grateful for the following for their insight and generous assistance: Dr Jane Hancock, Prof. S. Ambrishanjan, Profs Frederick M. and Catherine Asher, Pascale Bo, Dr Bea Bronner, Dr Dirk de Vries, Dr Max Gius, Dr Adolf Hecken Sij. Prof. Jeanne Halgren Kilde, and Andrew Kincaid.


5 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', Diacritics 16:1, Spring 1986, pp. 22–7.

6 For caste, see the numerous spatial restrictions in Indian post-colonial architectural manuals. For occupation, note the concentration of particular trades (e.g. goldsmiths) each in its own locale, whether in London or in pre-colonial and colonial India. For religion, note how in the early years of the New Haven colony only the 'elect' were permitted to live in the town proper, while the non-elect were required to live in the 'Suburbs'. John Archer, 'Puritan Town Planning in New Haven', Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 34:2, May 1975, pp. 140–9. And for citizenship, note Albert C. Grigg's recommendation to lay out the platsfom of our City in such a manner, that ... Strangers may have their habitation separate'. The Architecture of Lean Bovis Alberto, trans. James Leney, London, Thomas Edlin, 1719, III:23, emphasis added.


8 The standard source on Batavia is Frederik de Haan, Oud Batavia, Bandung, Nis, 1935. More recently see the excellent topographical account by Bea Bronner, Historische plateaupladen van Nederlandse streken, deel 4: Batavia, Alphen aan den Rijn, Carsalot, 1992.

9 The Japanese word kampung, meaning an enclosed settlement or quarter, had no such connotations. It was commonly translated into Dutch as 'Kwartier', as in the 'Javasche Kwartier' and 'Chinese Kwartier' that appear on the Coradi 1780 map of Batavia.

Excavating the Multicultural Suburb

Hidden histories of the bungalow

Anthony D. King


In the City.
Tea Rooms.
Lyons & Co., 168 Regent Street, 213 Piccadilly, 154 Strand, 23 Cheapside, 20 Great Chapel Street, 5 W., etc.; Hungarian Bread Co., 124 and 215 Regent Street and 41 Old Bond Street; Kestrel, 43 New Bond Street; Studio, 85 New Bond Street; Bengali, 21 Conduit Street, W.; Fuller, 358 Strand, W.C., and 31 Kensington High Street, W.; Mrs. Robertson, 161 New Bond Street; also the shops of the Golden Grain Bread Co., the British Tea-Table Co., and the Aristocrat Co.


This is the symbolization of English identity . . . what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea? Where does it come from? Ceylon – Sri Lanka, India. There is no English history without that other history.


What is a bungalow? . . . our imagination transports us to India.
Robert A. Briggs, Bungalows and Country Residences (1891), Preface

It is not an overstatement to claim that the Western suburb is quintessentially an imperialist form of human settlement.