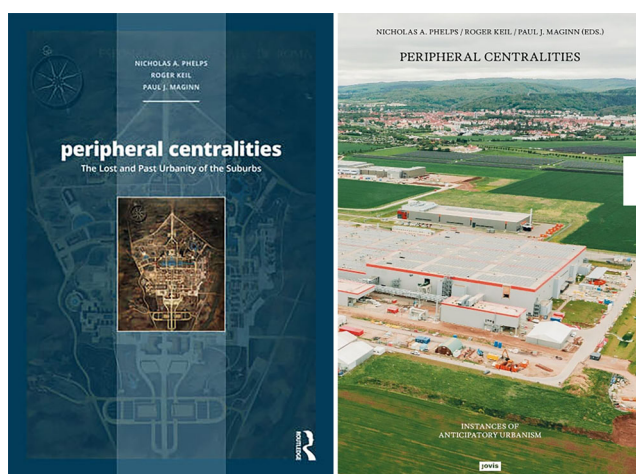


# Phelps, Nicholas A.; Keil, Roger; Maginn, Paul (eds.) (2025): Peripheral Centralities: The Lost and Past Urbanity of the Suburbs

## Phelps, Nicholas A.; Keil, Roger; Maginn, Paul (eds.) (2025): Peripheral Centralities: Instances of Anticipatory Urbanism

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The words ‘peripheral’ and ‘centralities’ placed side-by-side form what appears, at first sight, to be an oxymoron. Yet suburbanization has become fully intertwined with and embedded within national and subnational growth politics, which concentrate on urban regions as ‘attractors’ of indi-

viduals, investments, and growth machines. Suburbs have thus become key arenas of this transformation, playing a ‘central’ role in reshaping urban regions even as they continue to be treated as ‘peripheral’ to the urban – as the sub-root itself suggests. The two volumes sharing the title “Peripheral Centralities”, both edited by Nicholas A. Phelps, Roger Keil and Paul Maginn, pursue this line of argument, while their respective subtitles and introductions signal the distinctive character of each book. On the one hand, the volume published by Routledge explores peripheral centralities through the lens of “lost and past” urbanities, adopting a historical, theoretically informed standpoint and bringing together a heterogeneous set of contributions that are academic in a spare and rigorous sense. On the other hand, the volume published by Jovis frames its “instances of anticipatory urbanism” as a corollary to a long sequence of chapters richly accompanied by maps and images, working through them to navigate the planning of peripheral and suburban spaces and to drive forward a conceptual change in the epistemology of the urban periphery – evoking the structure of “Suburban Constellations: Governance, Land and Infrastructure in the 21st Century” (Keil 2013) and published by the same press.

A ‘peripheral centrality’, however, cannot simply be taken as a self-evident category, no matter how evocative the term may be. It demands a definition of its own, one capable of accounting for the specific ways in which centrality is produced, contested, and unevenly distributed within spaces that continue to be labelled, both institutionally

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and discursively, as peripheral. Borrowed from the field of Australian planning, the term helps us understand the symbiotic relationship between the urban and the suburban by placing the ‘peripheral’ unveiled by suburban areas at the centre of the stage, rather than treating it as something ‘less than’ the traditional urban. In doing so, and in line with what Keil (2017) had already argued in his theorization of a reconfigured ‘suburban planet’, peripheral centralities strive to “rethink urban theory from the outside in”, which entails a theoretical inversion, seeing urbanization from the periphery rather than from established city centres.

Such a rethinking involves a change of perspective on the suburban – viewing it not as something that remains conceptually and physically at the edges of the urban, but rather as a key arena through which contemporary suburbanization unfolds in diversified ways, and through which suburban ways of living contribute significantly to what can be more broadly conceived as urban livelihood, as also discussed within the post-suburban debate in Europe over the last twenty years (Phelps/Parsons/Ballas et al. 2006; Tzani-nis/De Vidovich 2026).

Nonetheless, this standpoint does not emerge as a normative statement aimed at repositioning suburban studies as a focal field for understanding twenty-first-century urbanization (that is – suburbanization). It rather arises as the result of how the outskirts of cities engulfed within urban regions have turned into areas that gather the desires of diverse citizens to access the urbanity, its amenities, and services, and to build their own livelihoods – which, in suburbia, results in a complex array of living conditions oscillating between wealth and poverty. This same desire for urbanity reproduced within suburban space has also fostered, for instance, a growing architectural heterogeneity, representative of the peripheral centralities addressed in the two books, whereby densification and settlement principles typical of the urban core are now increasingly replicated in suburbs (Lessard/Bérubé 2026).

Through an intellectual engagement that reinvigorates and reinforces the use of Lefebvre’s work on the production of space and on the ‘urban revolution’, both books enrich reflections emphasized in research on extended urbanization (Brenner/Schmid 2014), on territorial and urban political ecologies reshaped in a time of climate emergency (Tzani-nis/Mandler/Kaika et al. 2023), as well as on massive land-consumption and space-extensive processes related, for instance, to the increasingly pivotal and contested spaces of logistics and data-centre developments. From this Lefebvrian perspective, the two books add an important piece to the research framework calling for a move beyond ‘methodological cityism’, which has for years shaped urban studies and the analysis of peripheral space. In this respect, their contribution offers an innovative analysis of suburban

metabolisms and assemblages beyond the immediate identification of suburbs as constellations at the urban outskirts.

The two volumes bring together 36 chapters in total – 14 in the book published by Routledge and 22, all more compact than a conventional book chapter, in the one published by Jovis. Across both, the contributions share a strongly descriptive approach, drawing on well-chosen examples set in historical perspective, combining clear portrayals of the suburban change in the Jovis volume with more detailed theoretical deep dives in the Routledge volume, and thus providing an account of the founding assumptions and theoretical constructs behind the notion of ‘peripheral centrality’.

In this regard, the contemporary relevance of peripheral and suburban centrality is further underscored by the historical excursus on the transformation of metropolitan areas traced by *Robert Freestone* (Chapter 1 of the Routledge volume). A set of converging dynamics – housing unaffordability in core urban areas, the consolidation of remote and hybrid work arrangements, and the broader digitalization of labour, everyday habits, and access to amenities – are fuelling new forms of ‘counter-urbanization’ that, rather than producing a straightforward exodus from the metropolitan realm, are reconfiguring peripheries and suburbs *within* metropolitan regions as desirable settlement contexts. This is particularly true for residents who, while relocating outward, remain unable – or unwilling – to fully sever their ties with the urban core, often due to persistent work-related dependencies.

Although the two volumes follow different editorial structures, they do not necessarily add up to one another. On the contrary, in line with what has emerged over the past decade of ‘suburban studies’, the two books feed into a dialogue on the centrality of suburban areas and of the peripheral within contemporary urbanization and the spatial, environmental, social, and economic changes inherent to it. The analysis built around the notion of ‘peripheral centrality’ conceptually shifts the focus ‘from the suburban to the peripheral’, offering – as the concluding chapter of the book published by Jovis puts it – a new epistemology of the urban periphery. Yet, the ‘historical reading’ of ‘lost and past’ urbanities of peripheries undertaken in the Routledge volume sets the stage for the analysis of existing and planned examples of peripheral centralities traversed in the Jovis book, which aim to provide an additional set of methodological and thematic reflections on the realities of extended urbanization. In fact, the ‘historical pervasiveness’ of foregrounding peripheries in twentieth-century urban planning unfolds intensely across the chapters of the Routledge book, across diversified landscapes and histories: for instance, from the post-fascist peripheral transformation of EUR in Rome (*Marco Cremaschi*, Chap-

ter 10) and the ‘popular’ peripheries of Madrid (*Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago/Noel Manzano Gómez*, Chapter 6), to the post-colonial densification of urban peripheries in Lagos and Ouagadougou (*Laurent Fourchard*, Chapter 14); from European histories of the decline of peripheral mass social housing in UK mid-sized towns (*Andrew Hoolachan/Mark Tewdwr-Jones*, Chapter 11) and the failure of new satellite towns in Norway’s capital city (*Per Gunnar Røe*, Chapter 12), to Asian histories of emergent digital-led new peripheries in Bengaluru, India (*H.S. Sudhira*, Chapter 9), and industry-led new districts (*danweis*) in Wuhan, China (*Julie Miao/Nicholas A. Phelps/Sainan Lin/Zhigang Li*, Chapter 13). This trait of ‘pervasiveness’ also emerges as an analytical criterion in the book published by Jovis, alongside three other defining concepts: ‘agency’, ‘social relations’, and ‘technologies’.

The first notion reconnects with environmental issues – from the spread of harmful land uses such as golf courses in peripheral Johannesburg (*Federica Duca*, Chapter 3), to energy transition as a last-resort ‘retrofitting’ process in suburbs (*June Williamson*, Chapter 1), echoing the socio-technical complexities of suburban energy transition investigated by Dodson (2014). Relational aspects unfold through the framing of people as infrastructures (see Simone 2004), exploring social interactions arising from intercultural exchange in suburbs of Denver (*Erica Dorn*, Chapter 6), and from greenbelt land-use policies, whose multifunctional roles – growth control, farmland protection, climate mitigation and adaptation – frame greenbelts as connectors between the urban and the peripheral (*Sara Macdonald/Cara Chellew/Sean Hertel*, Chapter 7). Citizen ‘agency’ in urban peripheries is likewise addressed through environmental transformations affecting local communities, as in Indigenous resistance to hydroelectric operations in Manitoba (*Zachary Dark*, Chapter 8), or through tourism-led new towns reshaping European peripheries, as in the public-private transformation of the Paris *banlieues* (*Julien Aldhuy/Sophie Didier/Loic Vadelorge*, Chapter 9). Similarly, technological development fills peripheral voids with logistics infrastructure (*Julie Cidell*, Chapter 14), data centres (*Steven Logan*, Chapter 15), and sites of global connectivity such as airports (*Philip Graus/Robert Freestone/Simon Pin-negar*, Chapter 16). Alongside these heterogeneous trajectories – which describe contemporary urbanization as an effort that involves ‘centring’ the peripheral through complex social and spatial implications – the epistemological shift from the urban downtown to its outside also involves visual narratives of the peripheral landscape: from suburban highways (*Martina Loi*, Chapter 19), to starchitecture constructions far from city centres (*Lucia Cerrada Morato*, Chapter 21), to new cultural art-led districts in rapidly changing

Chinese cities (*Linhao Chen/Oleg Golubchikov/Justin Spinney*, Chapter 22).

Read together, the two volumes trace a common trajectory even as they travel it by different routes: both press for a reorientation of urban theory that takes the periphery, rather than the historical centre, as its vantage point. The Routledge collection builds this case through historical depth and conceptual rigour, while the Jovis volume pursues it through image-rich, forward-looking accounts of urbanism already taking shape at the margins. The result is less a single unified argument than two complementary ways of arriving at the same reconceptualization of urban peripheries.

Yet this convergence also poses a question that remains, for now, an invitation rather than a resolution. ‘Peripheral centrality’ undoubtedly functions as a methodological device for moving beyond methodological cityism – but it remains to be seen whether it can mature into a durable theoretical framework, one capable of genuine dialogue with established paradigms such as extended urbanization, post-suburbanization, and the suburban planet, rather than simply adding itself to that same spectrum of critical urban theories while addressing largely overlapping empirical content. These open questions point to promising avenues for further research. Meanwhile, the two volumes – while inviting a multidisciplinary and cross-field engagement – speak most directly to different audiences: the Jovis book, with its visual orientation, to urban planners and practitioners; the Routledge volume, to scholars within urban studies broadly conceived.

#### Full reference of reviewed titles:

Phelps, N.A.; Keil, R.; Maginn, P. (eds.) (2025): *Peripheral Centralities: The Lost and Past Urbanity of the Suburbs*. New York: Routledge, 304 pp. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003367246>

Phelps, N.A.; Keil, R.; Maginn, P. (eds.) (2025). *Peripheral centralities: Instances of anticipatory urbanism*. Berlin: Jovis, 312 pp. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783986121525>

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