

An Overview of Ancient Rome and Other Early Suburbs

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The world will soon have [a population of 7 billion people](#). Regardless of the exact number, it hardly takes an official statement to recognize the problems with overcrowding—especially in poorer countries. Cities are constantly expanding and peripheral areas are forced to accommodate an increased number of residents. While some forms of suburban growth are by choice, most are an inevitable response to the housing needs of 7 billion worldwide residents.

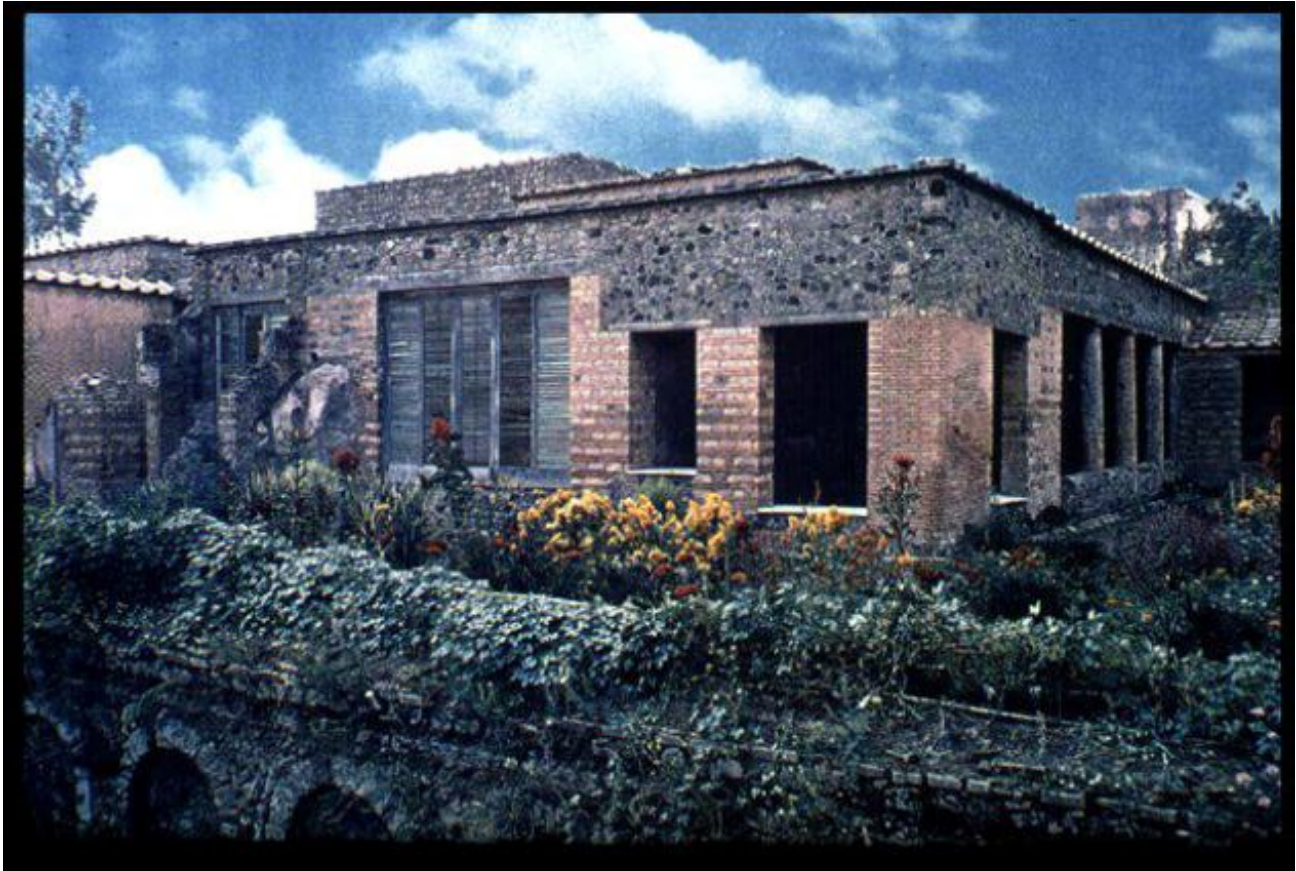
Yet scattered signs of suburban outcrops have been prevalent since the rise of cities themselves. Actual suburbanization—in terms of sustained peripheral growth—is a relatively new phenomenon. The transitional space between city life and rural countryside existed well before population densities became a leading cause in suburban growth.

The earliest form of suburbs can be traced back to Ur and Babylon. In these cities, walls traced the perimeter of the urban center, and within them dense populations existed in a congested area, typically associated with the social elite. A few miles outside the walls, however, a rural setting with crops and villages dominated the landscape. In between the two zones a transitional space exemplified the earliest form of suburbia.

These early, isolated examples of suburban entities were found in areas outside city walls, yet before crop lands. Records show that many ancient cities of substantial size consisted of some form of these scattered suburbs. While prevalent throughout different regions, these areas were not the consistent, planned outcrops associated with more modern suburban neighborhoods.

Early peripheral zones housed people and places of business that were socially and economically connected with city life, but could not be accommodated within the walls. Examples of these businesses were slaughterhouses, burial grounds, and other operations deemed unfit for city life. These outcrops of dwellings and businesses were called “suburbium”, derived from Latin, meaning literally what is below or outside the city walls.

While both Ur and Babylon illustrate examples of early suburbs, ancient Rome offers a better glimpse into life in an early suburb. The city itself was only six square miles, with social and economic inequalities predominant in the crowded urban center. The social elite built enormous palaces that ultimately absorbed most of the urban space, thus forcing the poor into crowded neighborhood blocks or out of the city walls all together.



Villa of the Mysteries in Ancient Rome

Yet a handful of wealthy Romans maintained summer villas on the periphery. These villas, built by choice as vacation homes, did not reflect the poor conditions associated with the clustered suburban communities immediately surrounding the city walls. Notably, Roman law often included “the city and the mile outside” as the official urban jurisdiction. The outer edge of this one mile was held in high esteem by the wealthy, who built small farms and private villas within easy reach of the city’s temples and markets.

One of the first written accounts of suburbs comes from the Latin poet Martial, who describes the draw of an ancient Roman villa:

“While the crooked valleys are crowded in mist, it basks in the clear sky and shines with a special radiance of its own... From here you can see the seven lordly hills, and can survey all of Rome, the Alban hills and those at Tusculum, every cool suburban spot.”

Even in ancient times the urban elite welcomed a reprieve from city life. This suburban pattern remained consistent for centuries, as boundaries remained focused as long as cities had walls. The areas immediately outside of a city wall carried a stigma of poverty and undesirable enterprises, while just further away sat an outcrop of villas used by social elites. If only today’s suburban world could be so easily defined.

-Matt Milloway

authors note: This short post does not take into account the ancient lands of the Far East and is simply meant to give brief examples of peripheral areas before widespread suburbanization.