# Town planning

Pevans reviews *Suburbia*

It's taken me a while to get to *Suburbia* as Bezier Games sold out at Spiel '12 – good news for designer and publisher Ted Alspach, but bad news for me. Mind you, it was my own fault as it wasn't until the Sunday that I got to Bezier's stand as I worked my way round the halls. However, a new printing is now with us and I've been able to catch up.

As the name suggests, the game is about developing a city's suburbs, or 'Boroughs' as the rules call them. Each player starts with the same buildings in their Borough. Through the game, they buy more tiles to expand this, increasing or decreasing their income (which provides the money to buy more buildings) and reputation, which attracts population. At the end of the game, the player with the highest population + bonuses wins.
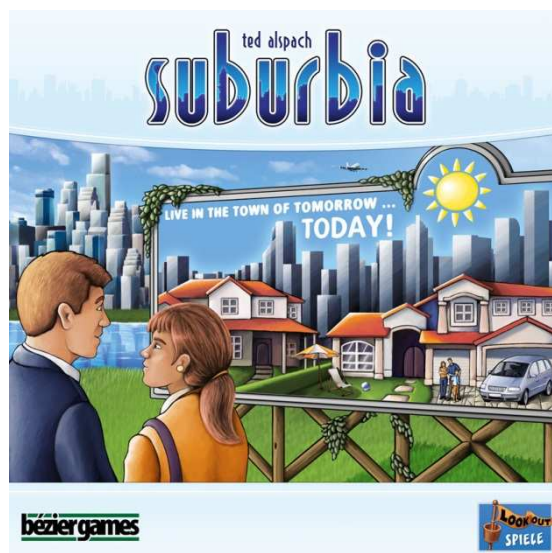
The key component of the game thus comprises the hexagonal building tiles. There are three sets of these and, in time-honoured style, the 'A' tiles are available first, then the 'B's and, finally, the 'C's. Even in a four-player game, only about two-thirds of the tiles will be available during the game. One effect of this is that the game will be different each time you play, as a different assortment of tiles will emerge. A second effect is that it also stops players planning for a specific building as they cannot be sure it will appear – even if there are three of them. The overall effect is to make the game more tactical than strategic.

To start the game, tiles are set out (face-up) in the 'market' and are available for players to buy. As well as the purchase price printed on the tile, buildings after the first two in the market cost a premium. As tiles are bought, those remaining in the market are moved along and a new tile goes in to the most expensive position. It's unlikely that tiles with a big premium will be bought (certainly in the early stages of the game when money is tight), so this does give players some warning of what tiles may come into play.

A special tile, the "1 More Round" tile, is shuffled into the middle portion of the 'C' stack. When it is drawn, the players complete the current round and then play one more. They then score any bonuses that they can and convert money to population/points. The winner is the player with the most points of course.

Let's put some flesh on those bones. Players start with a 'Borough' board each. This has two tracks, one of circular spaces for income and the other of square spaces for reputation. Players' markers – a cylinder and a cube – go onto these tracks to show their current levels. Players also have a square marker that goes on the separate 'Population' score board. As markers move along the scoring track they pass red lines, which get more frequent as the score rises. Each red line reduces the player's income and reputation. (The idea is that suburbs become less attractive as more people move in.)

Players add their starting building tiles alongside their Borough board. The symbols on these tiles show how their starting Income, Reputation and Population are arrived at. Players also get some cash

My borough at the end of a game. Note the "Housing projects" next to the Landfill…

and decide who will start the game (a copy of Ted's *Start Player* might be useful here!). The only purpose of this is to make sure that all players get the same number of turns.

There's one other thing to do at the beginning of the game: pick the circular goal tiles that will give bonuses at the end of the game. First, as many random goals as there are players are laid out for all to see. Second, each player gets two goal tiles and chooses one to keep. Goals are generally achieved by being the player with the most or least of something at the end of the game. Any player can get a public bonus – but a tie means nobody gets it – while only the owner can achieve their own goal (again, they need to do better than tie).

The goals do provide a strategic element to the game. However, players need to balance the points available from achieving a goal with the cost of going for it. For example, yellow (industrial) buildings generally increase income. Going for the "fewest yellow buildings" goal thus means it's harder to increase income. On the other hand, yellow buildings tend to reduce reputation, so that should stay high. It calls for a low cost strategy!

Each turn's play is pretty simple and will always involve removing a building tile from the market (and doing one of four things). The most likely action is to take a tile and build it, placing it adjacent to an existing building in your Borough. The building cost of the tile is shown on the left and you also have to pay the market premium if it's not in a $0 slot at the bottom of the market.

Then the tile takes effect. To start with, there may be an immediate adjustment to the owner's income, cash, reputation or population, according to the symbol(s) on the tile. A banner at the bottom of the tile tells you what other effects it may have, depending on other tiles in play. These other tiles may be

adjacent, anywhere in your Borough or, indeed, anywhere in play! The corollary of this is that you also have to check your other tiles to see if they're affected by the one just played.

For example, the Office Building (a blue, Commercial, tile) increases the owner's income by one and adds a further one for each adjacent blue building. When they place it, they thus get more income by putting it next to other blue buildings. What's more, their income goes up by one every time they subsequently place a blue building next to their Office. This produces a zoning effect as buildings tend to cluster – or spread out – according to what they do.

Another example is the Airport. This gives income and/or reputation for **every** airport in play (it also reduces reputation for adjacent green, Residential buildings). So, when you add an airport, you gain according to the number of airports already in play. Even better, you gain more every time any other player adds an airport. As there are plenty of this sort of tile, any purchase may affect your position, so you need to stay alert to what other players are up to.

As you will have worked out by now, it's the interactions between the tiles that make the game. Thus it's good to know what tiles are available. The game comes with a useful four-page sheet that shows all the different buildings (and the goals). There is additional information on the trickier tiles and a note of how many of them there are. Bear in mind, though, that no more than two-thirds of each set of buildings will be used in any game.

The second action for players is to take a building from the market, paying any premium, and place it upside down in their Borough as a 'Lake'. This can be done with any market building and the cost is zero. A lake gives the owner $2 (cash) for each adjacent building – when it's placed and when buildings are added. One first-time player asked me what the point of lakes was. He quickly realised when he ran out of cash in round 2! I have even seen a player win using cash-generating tiles like lakes, rather than building up his income. Another reason for building a lake is to deprive other players of a useful building, of course, without needing to spend money.

In addition to the buildings in the market, players can get extras of the starting buildings. There's no market premium on these, but the player must also discard a tile from the market and pay any premium on this. These buildings do not have big effects, but they are cheap. Again, I've seen a player win this way. Buying several of these early on helped build up his income before he started buying the more expensive buildings.

Finally, each player starts with three Investment ("x2") markers. Instead of adding a building, they may place one of these as their turn. This costs the construction cost of the tile and doubles its effects. Yes, it means a lake is worth another $2 per adjacent building at zero cost. Note, however, that it only doubles the tile's own effects, not the effects of other buildings triggered by the doubled tile. Players must, again, discard a building from the market and pay any premium on it.

Having taken one of these actions (play a market building, a lake, a starting building or an investment marker) and adjusted everything, a player ends their turn by taking their income in cash and moving their marker along the population track according to their reputation. (It is possible for income or reputation to be negative and, yes, you lose cash/population!) Then they adjust their income and reputation for any red lines they passed through. Finally, the market tiles are moved along to fill the gap and a new tile added to the end. Then it's the next player's turn.

Once the final round has been played, players see who, if anyone, has achieved the public goals and their individual goals. Money is converted to points ($5 = 1 population) and the player with the most points wins. My experience is that the winner will score over 100 points (but less than the 150 that is the maximum on the track). Hence, achieving a 20-point goal is likely to be a significant proportion of your score. Even a 10-point goal is not to be sniffed at.

I have been playing *Suburbia* quite a bit in recent weeks and having great fun with it. I suspect the random aspects will put some people off, but I like the fact that each game is different and that you can't predict which buildings will be available. The game is quite tactical, but the goals add a strategic element. It certainly demands your attention because what other players do can affect your own position.

The rules – and what you do in a turn – are fairly simple. The complexity is in the building tiles and how they work with each other. Thus, how and what you play depends on the tiles: those you have, those other people have and those in the market. As well as keeping an eye on what other people are doing, I suggest thinking about when to use an Investment marker. You get nothing for these at the end of the game, so it's definitely worth using them – when they're better than adding a new tile.

I think I would sum up *Suburbia* as a middleweight game with a significant luck element. I really enjoy playing it and am still discovering new buildings each time I play. It's also interesting how the absence of a building can change the game. In my last game there was only one airport, so it didn't provide the expected dividend.

Suburbia was designed by Ted Alspach and published by Bézier Games. It is a tile-laying, tactical board game for 1-4 players (I haven't tried the solitaire version), aged 8+, and takes 90 minutes to play (I'd allow a bit longer, especially with beginners). I give it 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

The end of a two-player game at Swiggers games club