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Review essay: elusive suburbs, endless variation.

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ELUSIVE SUBURBS, ENDLESS VARIATION

J.W.R. WHITEHAND and C.M.H. CARR, *Twentieth-Century Suburbs, a Morphological Approach*. London: Routledge, 2001, pp. ix, 214, illustrations, plans, maps and tables, index, £48.00 cloth.

RICHARD HARRIS and PETER J. LARKHAM, eds., *Changing Suburbs: Foundation, Form and Function*. London: E. & F.N. Spon, 1999, pp. xi, 280, illustrations, maps and tables, index, £55.00 cloth.

DENNIS HARDY, *Utopian England, Community Experiments 1900-1945*. London: E. & F.N. Spon, 2000, pp. ix, 305, illustrations, index, £25.00 paper.

The literature on suburbs is extensive, and yet the subject always seems elusive. For some the suburb is a geographical space, for others a cultural form, while for others still it is a state of mind. The suburb is a human achievement to be celebrated, or on the other hand it is an urban disaster. Even the definition of the suburb is contested, with some identifying it as the residential skirt around a recognizable urban area, while others refer to the vast hinterland beyond the metropolis. It is generally agreed, however, that the suburb is largely, though not entirely, residential in its character, and it would seem that it is from this monofunctionalism that the suburb derives its strengths and weaknesses.

It may be from this very point of agreement that the problems start, since its residential character could be a historical contingency which has distorted our conception of the suburb. In the pre-industrial city the suburb held many

functions, residence being only one of them. It supplied the centre with raw materials such as clay, sand and gravel for building purposes, and provided wood through coppicing for building and fuel. Industries too noxious to be tolerated within the city moved out to the downwind suburbs, while other areas were devoted to market gardens and pasture for the production of fresh food for the city dwellers. Recreation both licit and illicit flourished in the suburb, and the relatively healthy conditions outside the city made it the refuge from the plague or from other urban illnesses such as tuberculosis. All these activities generated a resident population, and a gradual drift of wealthy families to a scattering of villas set the precedent for the nineteenth- and twentieth-century expansion of residential suburbs.

The English middle class fuelled the expansion of the residential suburbs of the nineteenth century through putting money in houses and transport. The city centre, without the need to house its population, could expand its commercial sector unimpeded, so that the centre and the periphery seemed to develop independently of each other. This was an illusion since each suburb developed with some sort of relationship to the centre: this one industrial; that one residential; this one working class; that one middle class. There is a tendency, however, for studies of the suburb to ignore this connection to the centre, and especially when a comparison is being made between suburbs, they are often regarded in isolation from the context of the city as a whole.

Two of the books under review here reflect the strengths and shortcomings of contemporary suburb studies. In the first, in *Twentieth-Century*

Suburbs, a Morphological Approach, Whitehand and Carr set out a methodology which depends on a very narrow view of the suburb. However, in adopting this methodology they nonetheless succeed in posing some important questions about the historical changes in English inter-war suburbs, and provide some valuable concepts for dealing with these. The suburb for them assumes the status of a physical specimen which can be studied as a natural phenomenon. Their examples are drawn primarily from London and Birmingham, but include Newcastle and Lowestoft, and by using a variety of sources, they have traced the changes in the form, of not just the suburban house, but also of the estate layout. By looking at rejected plans of the Edwardian period, and by comparing them with later plans and with what was built, they have constructed a narrative of changing norms in suburban development. Such norms are often regarded either as expressions of an exuberant vernacular free from architectural pretensions or as tasteless popularism, without benefit of professional expertise, but Whitehand and Carr are able to provide documentation that demonstrates that their examples are neither, with architects as well as developers and clients involved in the design of suburban layouts and houses.

Another aspect of suburban houses not often tackled is the subsequent changes undertaken by a succession of owners. Loft conversions and front and back extensions have gradually changed the profile of many suburban houses, particularly those smaller houses exposed to the road. By plotting these changes, Whitehand and Carr are able to project their historical study into the present and beyond, to ponder the role of planning authorities in what seems to be a *laissez*

faire situation. At this point the reader might question the basis for this discussion, since we have shifted here to aesthetic judgements about individuality and choice, not present elsewhere in the study. There are obvious advantages in the method adopted here, but in circumscribing the focus to an analysis of the physical form of the suburban house, it is difficult to move out into a more discursive, cultural evaluation of the form and what people make of it. In addition the suburbs studied here are viewed in complete isolation from their centres and from adjacent suburbs, so that they become indeed specimens, suspended outside their urban context. Despite these reservations, Whitehand and Carr have developed some very valuable ways in which to conceptualise the English suburban house based on documentation not yet as widely employed as it should be.

In their conclusion Whitehand and Carr discuss the predominance of the garden suburb in “the United Kingdom, North America and other former British colonies” (p.182). They explain this preference through the historical location of the British nobility in the countryside, while in continental Europe, particularly in the Mediterranean region, “a grand urban house was generally the main residence of a noble family” (p.183), and the middle class tended to emulate this model by inhabiting an urban apartment. This difference has been noted for some time and has led to attempts to see similarities in suburbs across the world in Britain, America, Australia and Canada. But it may be asked is the phenomenon of the suburb the same wherever it is found? While the garden suburb developed over the last two hundred years in all these countries, it slotted

into different national narratives and urban configurations. The garden suburb in Britain elaborated the ideal of “home” in the home country during the period of the empire. In America, the garden suburb and its accompanying transport allowed city workers to participate in the pioneer myths of small town life by moving further and further away from the metropolis. In Australia the suburbs are a way of life, and signal the triumph of the immigrants in a sometimes hostile environment.

The second book under consideration here is concerned with the supposed overarching concept that there is a strong familial resemblance between the suburbs in Britain, America, and the areas of former British influence. The stated purpose of *Changing Suburbs: Foundation, Form and Function*, edited by Richard Harris and Peter J. Larkham, is to challenge this resemblance:

“By commissioning and collecting overviews of suburban development in Britain, Australia, Canada, and the United States, together with treatments of particular issues, we intend the present volume to highlight, and to raise questions about, national differences in the character and meaning of suburban development” (p. 2).

The collection is divided into two parts; the first dealing with early twentieth-century suburbs while the second deals with the later twentieth century, including questions of conservation. The approaches vary including cultural and urban history and urban geography, but with such a difference in approach it becomes

difficult to discern either difference or similarity in the various suburbs discussed, and certainly in the various countries where the suburbs are located.

The collection begins with Peter Newby and Mark Turner's "British Suburban Taste, 1880-1939" which concentrates on suburban consumption of furniture and of interior design as an educational process. The authors argue that choice of design can signal status, and that the suburb provided the location for the development of the consumption of design during the twentieth century. This is a theoretical piece which is on a fairly general level and starts the collection off at the very small scale of furniture, drawing its examples exclusively from Britain. None of the other essays in the collection deals with such a small scale as furniture, but the essay closest to this interest in suburban design is the one by Whitehand and Carr which elaborates the garden suburb theme discussed in their book reviewed above through a careful examination of house types and design in London, Newcastle and Birmingham. The other essays in this section all deal with the history of suburbs in Britain, America and Canada. The general question posed is what was the original configuration of these suburbs, physically and socially, and in some cases, how does this history impinge on our present day experience of these suburbs. Richard Turkington takes as a case study the history of the Liverpool Corporation suburb of Norris Green, and tries to answer the question of why a suburb which was built with such care and with such good intentions has more recently suffered neglect. Despite being historically focussed, this essay has implications for the future occupation of this and similar

suburbs, as social change upsets assumptions about class and “normal” family life.

The other essays in this section move away from Britain to Canada and the United States. Larry McCann in “Suburbs of Desire: the Suburban Landscape of Canadian Cities”, undertakes an overview of Canadian suburban development from 1900 to 1950. This is a vast undertaking, and perhaps too great a task for an essay of this length. Some areas come in for more detailed discussion, for example suburbs around Montreal and Victoria and Vancouver. The scale here is at the level of town planning, and provides a narrative about the official interest in constructing the nation’s suburban landscapes. While informative, the essay provides the basis for further study at a more detailed level of investigation, which would engage with the cultural meaning of the “desire” in the title. The notes on contributors places McCann at the University of Victoria, Australia. Should this not read University of Victoria, British Columbia?

The other two essays in this first section deal with American suburbs and set out to query the assumptions made about the social status of suburbs in American society up to the 1950s. Richard Harris’ “The Making of American Suburbs, 1900-1950s: A Reconstruction”, suggests that the story he has constructed is different from the one we have been led to expect. By examining the process of suburb production, Harris has identified three different types of suburbs: the middle class, residential suburb developed by individual clients and builders before the second world war, but subsequently by speculative builders; unincorporated areas where small owners often built their own houses on lots

bought from land speculators; and industrial suburbs, where builders erected “large numbers of basic dwellings in a limited variety of styles” (p. 105).

Investigation into the process of production allows Harris to present a dynamic model of suburban development, and offers further suggestions of how American suburbs can be conceptualized.

The final essay in this section focuses on the American industrial suburb. Robert Lewis, in “Running Rings Around the City: North American Industrial Suburbs, 1850-1950”, points out the importance of the industrial suburb in the expansion of American and Canadian cities, not just in the mid-twentieth-century post-war period, but from the middle of the nineteenth century. On inspection the model of the industrial and working class central urban area, within a ring of middle class suburbs, does not hold up where many examples of industrial suburbs point to alternative development. Just as does Harris, Lewis convinces that there is still more work to be done on suburbia in America, before we can comprehend the full impact this form has had on urban development.

The second half of this book is devoted to “later twentieth-century suburbs”, although two of the five essays deal with the conservation of historic suburbs, admittedly of deep concern for contemporary planners and residents alike. Recently attention has turned to “edge city” as the latest manifestation of the Anglo-American suburb, and Andrew Jonas’ essay, “Making Edge City: Post-Suburban Development and Life on the Frontier in Southern California”, will read for many as the future. The dynamism of Jonas’ story derives from the detailed and even dramatic narrative, which links the edge city, in this case Moreno

Valley, with the wider context of the region and of the centre of Los Angeles.

Jonas is also sensitive to the original functions of the locations of edge city:

“Like the City of Fontana, Moreno Valley perhaps has become a ‘junkyard of dreams’ (Davis, 1990) for those Southern Californians who have aspired to transform poultry farms and citrus groves into a latter-day Arcadian dream” (p.218).

Perhaps because his example is so recent, the previous existence of the area before the appearance of edge city has not yet been expunged, and this presence adds considerably to the dynamism of the account and the critique of what has subsequently transpired.

The essay “What Women’s Spaces? Women in Australian, British, Canadian and US Suburbs” is the only truly comparative chapter in the book. Three of the four authors, Veronica Strong-Boag, Isabel Dyck and Kim England, are working in Canada, and the fourth, Louise Johnson, is in Australia, and their essay consists in a useful review of the literature covering the social aspects of suburban living as they impinge on women’s lives in Britain, America, Canada and Australia. Since Betty Friedan revealed back in the 1960s that women were discontent in the suburbs, the conundrum over the gendering of suburban space has continued to puzzle commentators. The suburb is associated with the “feminine”, distinct from the masculine inner city, but it is rejected by a substantial number of women. Another contradiction centres around the old adage that the suburb fosters the separation of work and home, when the truth is that women “work” in the home long hours, unpaid and unobserved. This essay assumes a

sociological viewpoint in the analysis of the impact of the suburb on women's lives, and although the western family would seem to allow opportunity to compare the different societies, they refuse to make easy leaps of association:

“What have been the differences among suburbs located in the four nations? Few have cared to ask. This more comparative research is largely in the future. Part of the answer lies in the past, in the way that each country has chosen to make sense of the suburb” (p.179).

Like other essays in this volume, this chapter points towards further work that needs to be done.

Tony Dingle's essay “Gloria Soame': the Spread of Suburbia in Post-War Australia”, fits into this section because it deals with the post-war period, but since Australia experienced its greatest expansion of suburbanization after that of Britain and America, there is a sense here of *déjà vu*. This is not to say that there are not unique characteristics in the Australian suburbs, dependent on the demographics of the post-war period and on the natural climate and physical conditions. Transposing traditional suburban styles of house and garden design from Britain and the eastern US produces a challenge in the hot, dry climate of many Australian towns. An issue that arises at the end of the essay is one endemic to the study of all suburbs, “dual occupancy” or the increase in density by building in the back gardens of the individual houses. Since residential suburban building began in seventeenth-century Britain, there has been the tendency to redevelop suburbs at higher densities, and this is perhaps the greatest danger to the conservation of historic suburbs.

Two essays in this section handle the conservation of suburbs. David L. Ames' "Understanding Suburbs as Historic Landscapes through Preservation" deals with the problems in US suburban conservation, while Peter J. Larkham's "Conservation and Management in UK Suburbs" looks at the British experience. Ames has been involved in producing guidelines for the preservation of suburbs for the National Register of Historic Places of the United States. Over the years it has become common for individual buildings associated with prominent historical figures to be preserved, but it is less common for landscapes, especially those not considered "natural", such as suburban landscapes, to be protected. According to Ames the task facing those wanting to preserve American suburban landscapes is one of education, and is daunting because of the reluctance to accept recent history as significantly "historical" and because of the chronic negative critique of the sprawling American suburb.

At the beginning of his essay, Peter J. Larkham asks "Why conserve at all?" a question that can be legitimately asked, but here never answered satisfactorily. Larkham takes the methods of Whitehand and Carr and compares the minute changes, which cumulatively transform suburbs, with the various design guidelines provided by local planning authorities. Outside conservation areas there is really no control over what people can do, and even within conservation areas, Larkham claims, little is done to curb small-scale changes. Larkham's exercise of matching the official guidance with specific examples of suburban change is instructive, but his range of references is narrow which leads

to anomalies such as locating the Parker Morris recommendations in the period after the First World War.

The collection of essays here does indeed point up differences in suburban development in the different countries represented, but it is not clear that these differences come from the suburbs studied or from the various methods used by the contributors. There seems to be no overarching theme which would allow comparison, so that the volume becomes rather a compendium of recent research undertaken on suburbs by Anglo-American academics. It is useful having these essays brought together, but it could just as well have been a completely different mix of suburbs and methods.

The third book under review here, Dennis Hardy's *Utopian England, Community Experiments 1900-1945*, is the odd one out. It is not ostensibly about suburbs, but focuses on various attempts during the twentieth century of establishing utopian communities based on very disparate ideals. All the communities involved had a "back to the land" dimension, which took their proponents out beyond the city to what was seen as a more natural existence in the countryside. The first three chapters deal with the more usual story of utopian ideals in English life by recounting the origins of the garden city movement, but there is here much more of the context in which Howard and his colleagues were operating, with more emphasis on smaller, more ephemeral projects, as well as the more long-term examples of Letchworth and Welwyn. Three thousand acres at Hadleigh in Essex were purchased by the Salvation Army in 1891 to provide a "farm colony" for unemployed men and women in preparation for a life in the

colonies overseas. A later example was the Potton estate in Bedfordshire, bought by the Land Settlement Association in 1934 with the purpose of settling unemployed men and their families. But even in the chapter on the Garden City movement there is much new material, for example the story of the Jennings family, Welwyn's first residents, who made their way to the new garden city in 1920 in a showman's caravan, drawn by a coal merchant's horse. Such details make vivid the context in which these movements began and their projects undertaken.

Subsequent chapters are less relevant to the study of the suburb, but are nonetheless valuable social history of the early twentieth century, at the time so much suburban development was going on. Chapters four and five examine a variety of communities, established on the one hand according to artistic ideals in the case of C.R.Ashbee's community in the Cotswolds at Chipping Campden, Eric Gill at various locations and the Elmhursts at Dartington in Devon; and on the other, religious communities such as Buckfast Abbey, also in Devon. More unusual was the Bruderhof community, a radical Christian group established in Germany and Liechtenstein in the 1920s, which settled at Ashton Keynes in the Cotswolds in 1936. Socialist groups also at times sought to establish utopian communities, and there is a chapter on these attempts including Edward Carpenter's at Millthorpe, Guild Socialism and the Woodcraft Folk. The thread running through all these experiments is the anti-urban attitude that led the exponents out of the cities and onto the land.

The move to the suburbs during the twentieth century has had its own utopian element, where the light and air of the low density development promised health to pale city dwellers, where home ownership offered freedom from the landlord. However, as the research presented in the books under review reveals, there is much more to suburbs than a utopian impulse, and more complexity than has been conceded by those who dismiss suburbia as a homogeneous experience wherever it is found. The real interest in the subject of the suburb lies in the variety of the form found under very many different circumstances. The function of the pre-residential suburb, whether agricultural, industrial or recreational can have influence after the houses have come, and the residential “function” of the resulting suburb in relation to the centre is also significant in the formation and changing fortunes of the area. The Anglo-American garden suburb can look similar wherever it is found, but closer inspection, as the studies reviewed here show, reveals endless regional variation and a subject well worth pursuing.

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Suburbs Utopia Housing Conservation