

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



**IN DEFENCE OF A
NEW SUBURBIA**

Simon Cooke

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Academy of Ideas team

IN DEFENCE OF A NEW SUBURBIA

Hardly a day passes without another city dweller with a newspaper column telling us suburbia is a car-dependent sprawl, littered with ticky-tacky houses, creating an environmental desert of parking spaces and artificial grass. But if we are to sort out our housing crisis and provide the homes people want, we *need* suburbia. A walkable, cyclable and drivable new suburbia where families are cherished and the basic facilities we need are mostly round the corner. More importantly, we need to win the argument for why suburbia isn't simply second best to city living, but the sought-after ideal for most families in search of freedom.

In 1826, a private act of parliament was passed allowing the property of the late John Cator of Stumps Hill to come under the control of his great nephew, John Barwell Cator. This unusual arrangement avoided a complicated trust in the interests of the direct descendants of Cator's original inheritor, George Sparkes. John Barwell Cator was an ambitious man and saw the opportunity that his late great uncle's estates brought. The estates included a stretch of land between Sydenham, Southend (what we now call Catford) and Bromley, all within the Manor of Beckenham, as well as a smaller estate at

Blackheath. The railways had arrived, stretching out southwards and eastwards from central London and Cator saw the chance to build houses - lots of houses. As the University of Greenwich's 'Ideal Homes' project describes:

*'In 1857, the Cators, who also had sizable land holdings at Blackheath, realised that their estates were ripe for residential development and soon suburban villas were spreading out from the new station. Built in the style of an Indian colonial town, with wide tree-lined avenues and large detached houses in generous gardens, they were designed to appeal to the wealthy, looking for a home out of London but convenient for the city. As this market became saturated, the financially astute Cators turned to building smaller properties.'*ⁱ

Today, we tend to think of suburbia as being about the car. But these suburbs were created by the railways, allowing the middle classes of London to have fine houses with good gardens all while commuting into the city for work. What these developments signalled - not just the Cator estates, but many others, too - was the beginnings of England's suburbia.

I've picked the Cator development because it was one of the biggest and I was brought up in Beckenham, surrounded by the names granted by the estate's developers - Cator Park, Albemarle Road, Foxgrove

Road, Copers Cope. Suburbia, where so many of us grew up, was built to give people a sense of openness, an escape from the unhealthy air and intrusive noisy bustle of the city. At the end of the nineteenth century, Thomas Millar describes a walk from Dulwich to Beckenham:

*'Having had a glass of ale and a crust of bread and cheese at the Woodman, we will strike down the hill and peep at Annerley station. We shall have woods on either side. There runs a rabbit! That was a pheasant, which sprung up before us! There's woodbine for you, you might gather an armful. What a variety of beautiful flowers are spread at our feet! This is a place where the inhabitants of London come in hundreds on a Sunday to breathe the fresh air, for once in Croydon railway carriages they are wafted here in a few minutes. Ten years ago, it was wild woodland.'*ⁱⁱ

As the city grew and the railways extended, the suburbs of London continued to spread. But, while the people of the city were voting with their money by moving out from the city, an elite criticism of suburbia began to appear.

This criticism ran parallel to a new trend - people who were less grand began to afford the comforts of a three-bedroomed home with a decent garden just a 10-minute walk from a train station that would take them to the city in half an hour. Suburbs, these urban

elitists said, were dull and lacked community - or at least the sort of community a working man would enjoy.

Sarah Bilston wrote about how the stereotyping of suburban life grew during the nineteenth century and this supposedly dull and, in Victorian terms, ‘womanly’ world attracted the bile of urban writers. ‘Your vile suburbs can offer nothing but the dullness of the grave’, writes Edward Bulwer-Lytton in a typically snooty comment about new developments in the 1830s and 1840s.ⁱⁱⁱ

The now-clichéd snobbish criticism of suburbs as dull, lacking in the splendid glories of city life and enjoyed only by dull people is nothing new - but goes right back to the earliest suburbs as they filled up with decent, hard-working middle-class people.

An old prejudice

By the twentieth century, suburbs were growing around all the world’s great cities, and the invention of the motor car stretched the spread of new developments - especially in the US. But the idea of suburbia as boring and feminised had been set by those urban elites, and it was seen as a place without

business, lacking the accidental engagement that people still believe drives the success of dense and crowded cities.

In the 1930s, that grandest of Eton-educated critics, Cyril Connolly, described suburbia as ‘incubators of apathy and delirium’.^{iv} By the 1960s, the sociologist and critic Lewis Mumford summed up his 30 years of sneering like this:

‘In the mass movement into the suburban areas, a new kind of community was produced, which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge: a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mould, manufactured in the central metropolis. Thus, the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.’^v

Today, most people in the US, Britain and France live in suburbia.^{vi} Our culture is filled with images of suburban life - a life that is the mainstay of comedy, drama and literature. Great British 1970s sit-coms like *The Good Life* and *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*, or

similar American staples like *Rosanne* and *The Simpsons*, all use ordinary suburban life as the framework for humour. We live in a suburban culture, and our daily lives are filled with activities made possible by our suburban lives. And yet, hardly a day passes without those suburbs being denigrated as ‘sprawl’ and ‘car-dependent’. As trendy Australian architecture critic Elizabeth Farrelly sneeringly put it: ‘Suburbs are about boredom, and obviously some people like being bored and plain and predictable.’^{vii}

If we are to meet people’s aspirations for a high quality of life, with space and community, we need suburbia.

Today, there is a sort of demonic bargain between the urbanist inheritors of Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Cyril Connolly, and another phenomenon with its roots in the nineteenth century’s urban elite: the NIMBY.

Enter the NIMBY

NIMBYs, to the unacquainted, are ‘not-in-my-back-yard’ opposers of housing developments. I know we don’t think of social reformer Octavia Hill and town planner Patrick Abercrombie as NIMBYs, but both made their names by opposing suburban development. Hill used the fig leaf of giving the poor access to the countryside as the case for stopping suburban development in North London, while Abercrombie - the man most responsible for the London Green Belt - helped create the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) on the basis that we couldn’t have all that urban economic activity outside the city:

‘There is no time to be lost if the English countryside is not to be reduced to the same state of dreary productiveness to which the English town sank during the industrial revolution of last century. If we have allowed Adam Smith’s doctrine of the ‘invisible hand’, gradually creating order out of individual success, to dominate our industrial towns and coalfields, we cannot afford to wait for a similar emergence of economic beauty from a devastated countryside. It is poor economics to bring prosperity and improvement in one direction and at the same time induce deterioration.’^{viii}

If that sounds like a chunk from a Conservative MP's speech on housing numbers, we should not be surprised - except that Abercrombie wrote those words in 1927, and Octavia Hill was trying to stop development in the 1880s. Suburbia, however much the urban elite find it dull, represented an aspiration. This aspiration was firstly for the urban middle classes and, latterly, with good council housing and better pay, for the working classes.

The middle class still aspires to that suburban life and the urban elite still sneer, presenting ideas like 'gentle density'^{ix} to turn suburbs into apartment living, running Twitter accounts called 'shit planning' or 'new-build hate'. The then housing minister, Michael Gove, overturned the recommendation of planning inspectors for 169 new homes in Kent because it was of a 'generic suburban nature', presiding over the codification of anti-suburban sneer into our planning system under the guise of concern for 'beauty'.

The decisions made by governments to limit urban growth were less about saving workers from 'suburban dullness', and more about meeting the criticisms of sprawl and the dislike of (usually other people's) cars. By limiting land supply for new homes, Abercrombie's Green Belt meant that the potential for London to grow would result in rapidly inflating house prices and rents serving to marginalise the

urban middle class. This policy, in various guises, was enacted across the world from Bradford, Manchester, Portland and Auckland to Barcelona and Melbourne. Everywhere, the result of the policy has been higher housing costs.

If we are to meet people's aspirations for a high quality of life, with space and community, we need suburbia. We need places that are a compromise between town and country, that are not places of work or high culture, but designed around families, community and everyday living.

The good life

People, given the opportunity, choose suburbia. They opt for a home and garden with parking for the car because it is easy, comfortable and spacious enough to let the kids kick a football around. The problem is that the planners, urbanists and experts don't agree that suburbia is where people should live. American writer Suzannah Lessard described the typical elite response to suburban life:

'Off they went, the two of them, both with their beautiful old houses and even more soulful gardens, on the emptiness of the suburban dream. All about what a crime the destruction of

the countryside was, and not one word about what those houses, those small plots of land, might mean to those who owned them, let alone the fairness of distributing a little to many rather than sticking with a lot for a few.^{7x}

Suburbia is both democratising and liberating. In the 1930s and 1950s, people who previously lived precarious lives in poor-quality city rentals were able to move to their own space with their own house and their own pleasant garden.

In the minds of critics, living a comfortable suburban life detracts from the imperative of work by highlighting home life, family and community.

It is true that the motor car - another great liberator of the masses - played an increasingly important part in suburban life. Modern planners may have added a distaste for 'car-dependency' to their general objection to 'sprawl', but, for most people, planning their lives - using a car to get to work, ferry the kids about and do the shopping - is entirely normal. Not only that, many find driving pleasurable in its own right.

The current planning obsession with urban density (something those trendy urbanists share with Henry

Potter, the villain in *It's A Wonderful Life*) results in more people living in environments they wouldn't have chosen. It also returns us to those sexist mid-nineteenth-century views of suburban life as feminine and unbusinesslike. In the minds of critics, living a comfortable suburban life detracts from the imperative of work by highlighting home life, family and community.

Suburbia represented the triumph of the middle-class - a place built in their image, containing the things that made their lives good.

The suburb wasn't the invention of a planner or some grand thinker. For all that people like Ebenezer Howard tried to picture a sort of utopian suburbia, all they really did was polish what had been done by builders and the families who bought the homes they built - men like John Cator. This *laissez-faire* development may explain why it is that planners, architects and the cultural elite dislike suburbia. As something that wasn't designed by the great and good, or funded by governments, suburbia represented the triumph of the middle-class - a place built in their image, containing the things that made their lives good.

Build a new suburbia

Record low numbers of young children should be a wake-up call for those who argue for ever more crowded cities. There is an urgent need to do something about the housing crisis, but we shouldn't do this at the expense of family life. Technocratic fixes, like subsidised childcare, ignore the problem of those who want to sustain the sociological disaster of a world directed entirely towards economic productivity.

A good suburb has soft edges in contrast to the hard environment of the city - it provides for community and allows space for football, dog walks and throwing frisbees.

For many, crowded city life with competition for everything from parking spaces to schools is enough reason to put off starting a family.

What we need to do is build a new suburbia, to provide places that aren't focused on productivity or the momentary pleasures that make this grind bearable - but are still well connected to the city. We need places that work for children, which provide an

environment that tells us work isn't everything. The reason why suburban life proves so popular among families is that it provides an escape from the rat race of working life.

If we want to meet the aspirations of the next generation, this new suburbia must take the best of the old suburbs - living space, gardens, good links to public transport, community - and add responses to modern concerns about the environment, biodiversity, walkability and active travel. Our planners, instead of spending hours on development control and management, need to spend their time doing actual planning, forcing the government to commit to financing the infrastructure that makes a new suburbia possible. We *can* have walkable communities with social infrastructure close to where people live, we *can* build energy-efficient homes, we *can* design places with woodland and use these designs to enhance biodiversity. Most importantly, we *can* create places that prioritise children and families, rather than, as seems the case with dense urban places, treating them as an afterthought.

But first we must recognise that suburban life represents an acceptable compromise between the business of the city and the muddy boots of the countryside. It may, to urban elites, seem dull when set alongside the high culture and commercial dynamic

of the city. But it isn't dull inside suburbia - it is a place that works. Suburbia is that comfy pair of slippers, sitting in the garden with a mug of tea, cooking Sunday dinner while the kids charge round the garden annoying Grandpa. A good suburb has soft edges in contrast to the hard environment of the city - it provides for community and allows space for football, dog walks and throwing frisbees.

I started with the birth of my hometown, so it makes sense to finish with where I am now - a different suburbia in Cullingworth, Bradford. We call it a village, but it works like a suburb, with people skittling off in all directions outwards for work and play. We've also got that walkability and the social infrastructure you need for a good community. There's a pre-school, a primary school and a secondary school, there's a village hall, a doctor's, a post office and a chemist. We've got two pubs, two clubs, a co-op, a butcher, several hairdressers and a recreation ground. We've got a football team and a cricket team, scouts and guides, a grand youth club and any number of activities for old and young. Without anyone forcing anyone else to do anything, we meet most of the daily needs for people within a few minutes' walk of their front door. We still use our cars - but, if you don't have one, you can still live a pretty good life.

This is what I mean by a new suburbia - building lots of places like Cullingworth where people can feel part of a community, families are treasured and supported and the basic facilities we all need are round the corner. Getting this means getting over our obsession with big cities and urban density. But it also means we need to allow places like Cullingworth to grow a little bigger, to provide the homes and communities that tomorrow's families deserve.

Britain's suburbs were built in the teeth of opposition from urban elites and what we now call NIMBYs. Suburbs succeeded because they provided what people wanted - a home, a garden and, later, somewhere to park the car. Today, the same battle is being fought as NIMBYs, YIMBYs, architects and planners try to stop a new generation of families from enjoying the suburban life they want. It's time to fight for suburbia.

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