

BRA Conference 2019

Living on the Edge: Records of Suburbia

Abstracts



Joanna Smith (Senior Investigator, Historic England)
Historic England's Project on Suburbs

Suburban environments are often taken for granted and not always perceived as places with intrinsic historic or heritage value. Therefore they can be subject to neglect and unsympathetic change. In 2012 English Heritage (as Historic England then was) initiated a project on suburbs that was national in scope and intended to examine suburban development of all kinds from c.1830 to the present day. Through a synthesis of existing knowledge and a programme of new research and fieldwork, the project was intended to provide the context and understanding needed by professionals responsible for the protection and management of suburbs. The work is now nearing completion and the paper will discuss the background to the project, its methodology and outcomes with a particular focus on the kinds of records that were used to select particular suburbs for study and to determine their level of interest and significance.



Sally Bevan (Senior Archivist, London Metropolitan Archives)
Hampstead Garden Suburb - 'the aesthetically most satisfactory and socially most successful of C20 garden suburbs'

Hampstead Garden Suburb is an area of outstanding architectural importance situated to the north west of London. In 1951, Nikolaus Pevsner in his 'Buildings of England - Middlesex' described it as 'the aesthetically most satisfactory and socially most successful of C20 garden suburbs'. The Suburb was the vision and accomplishment of Henrietta Octavia Barnett (later Dame Henrietta) and the collection consists of wide ranging material which documents the creation of Hampstead Garden Suburb and its growth and development during the twentieth century. This talk will give an overview of the collection and its highlights as well as possible areas of research.



James Ranahan (Collections Archivist, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and Research Fellow, Suburban Birmingham Research Project)
'A Meeting of Minds on the Brummagem Omnibus': Adult Education and Transport assessed through the Suburban Birmingham Project

The 'Suburban Birmingham' project was a 'knowledge exchange' collaboration between Birmingham Archives & Heritage, Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery and the University of Birmingham. Academics, archivists, librarians and curators explored collections across the partner institutions, to examine the lived experience of suburbia through records, publications and objects. (contd. over)



James Ranahan 'A Meeting of Minds on the Brummagem Omnibus'

This presentation will provide an overview of the project's aims and objectives, together with the operating methodologies employed to research and communicate diverse aspects of suburban life. Two such aspects will then be considered in detail, namely the development and provision of adult education services in the suburban space shared by intellectuals and workers, and the transport developments which made large scale suburban development possible and which facilitated mass access to civic amenities – including adult education. For both aspects, the features peculiar to south-west Birmingham and those common across suburban development across Britain will be discussed, as will the types of records and other sources encountered through the project.



**Deborah Sugg Ryan (Professor of Design History and Theory, University of Portsmouth and author of *Ideal Homes: Design, Architecture and Suburban Modernity in England, 1918-39*)
*The interwar suburban semi: From the 'ideal' to the 'real' home***

In this paper I explore the primary sources used in my recent book *Ideal Homes, 1918-39: Domestic Design and Suburban Modernism* (2018), a study of the design, material culture and decoration of the 'ordinary' interwar semi. The collections and displays of libraries, archives and museums, with a few exceptions, were often of limited use, documenting the ideal rather than the real; more idealised Art Deco *Poiret* set than suburban Pinner. I hoped to find unstaged amateur snapshots of messy lived in interiors but these proved elusive in a time before flash photography was widely available to the public. So I turned to my personal experience of an interwar suburban semi. This time capsule house was decorated and furnished at the time of completion in 1934 and remained largely unchanged 60 years later when I purchased it. This was supplemented by browsing in charity and junk shops, car boot fairs and eBay for evidence of the kind of furniture, furnishings and other stuff that has often been condemned as 'bad design' and 'bad taste' or overlooked because it doesn't fit neatly into a linear modernist history of design.



Sara Kinsey (Head of Historical Archives, Nationwide Building Society) *Building Societies and the Suburbs*

Building societies emerged from the self-help movements of the early modern period. After a period of enviable growth, they were the major players in the mortgage market by the inter-war period. The Societies provided the finance for millions of households to buy their dream home in the suburbs. They also fuelled the demand for those homes, with their advertising emphasising the benefits and social desirability of home ownership. The archives of Nationwide Building Society were established in 2016 and contain the historic records of around 250 different building societies. From small local players to national concerns, these societies played a vital role in funding the growth of the suburbs. This paper examines the history and influence of the building societies, and the sources that have survived in their archives.