

THE **suburban landscape**
200 YEARS OF GARDENS & GARDENING

Although there is more to the suburban landscape than gardens and gardening, it would not exist without these. Gardened spaces in between the houses, roads and stations help define the suburb as ‘suburban’ – at the heart of which is the private garden, both front and back of the dwelling.

In exploring the suburban landscape over the last two hundred years this exhibition considers the significance of gardens and gardening in the making of what has become the most ‘English’ of landscape environments. Arranged into two interrelated parts, it first looks at the evolution of the landscape as a whole, including the development of its public open spaces, and suggests that despite subsequent infilling and densification, the landscape had acquired its character by the Second World War. Although increasingly at risk of development, private gardens still make up a large part of the suburban landscape and gardening remains one of the nation’s consuming passions. Moreover, the private uses of the suburban garden are intimately linked to the shared values of the larger public landscape.

This exhibition looks at the development of the landscape in this area, focussing on parts of Barnet and Enfield. Similar stories could be told for other parts of London and the edges of other big cities in England and Wales.

The Country House and Villa

For hundreds of years, members of the aristocracy and gentry had kept estates on the edges of London used for hunting or temporary courts or as retreats from London’s affairs. By the end of the eighteenth century, forests like Enfield Chase and much common land had been enclosed and turnpike roads had been built making daily travel to London by horse possible.

In the early nineteenth century, a new merchant class made wealthy by industry and empire began to settle on the edges of London in areas like this. The landscape then consisted of hay meadows, market gardens and dairy farms, common scrublands, the remains of a royal forest and a few scattered aristocratic estates. The new residents wanted fashionable downscaled country estates with gardens, set in picturesque parkland. The villa and its garden were born. These new villa inhabitants were suburban; the head of the household earned his money in London but kept his family in pleasanter and healthier surroundings outside it. Unlike the country house estates, villas were not self-supporting, although their gardens produced food for the household and demonstrated the wealth of their owners through their layout and planting schemes.



View of South Lodge, Enfield Engraving by William Ellis, 1808
Courtesy of Guildhall Library, City of London

There were a number of large villas in this area. South Lodge, formerly one of the four lodges of Enfield Chase (located just to the east of the present site of Oakwood Underground station) was one of the most important. Visited by John Claudius Loudon, the celebrated landscape designer, writer and critic in July 1839, South Lodge had extensive gardens and two ornamental lakes – one of which survives today. Two other villas were Bohun Lodge and Little Grove. Bohun Grove was on the site now occupied by Middlesex University’s Cat Hill Campus, while Little Grove, laid out by the famous landscape gardener Capability Brown between 1768 and 1770, was situated just south of it. Postcards dating from World War I when Little Grove was used as barracks, showed the grandeur of its gardens. It no longer survives, but Grovelands, in Southgate, landscaped by Humphrey Repton, still exists today as a public park.



Postcards of Little Grove, as barracks 1916 Private Collection

Victorian Villas: The coming of the Railway

The coming of the railroad, the Great Eastern in 1849 and the Great Northern in 1850, made it possible for members of new social classes to settle on the ever-expanding edges of London. These new suburbanites included professionals and civil servants, skilled artisans and to service new developments, domestic servants and labourers from other parts of Britain. Each wave of suburbanisation has brought a diversity of social groups and today’s suburbs are economically and culturally very diverse.

Early gardening advice books and magazines such as those published by John Claudius and Jane Loudon from the 1820s to the 1840s were aimed at the new villa dwellers and tended to be socially progressive in their views. Besides offering gardening advice, they encouraged women to garden, introduced new botanical discoveries and discussed the training and wages of gardeners. By 1900 there were countless publications aimed at every kind of gardener.



Foulsham’s New Gardening Book
Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

With the outbreak of war in 1939, the suburban garden was drafted into the war effort and soon the government was producing its own stream of information and instructions on the growing of fruit and vegetables. In September 1940 the ‘Dig for Victory’ campaign was launched by Mr Middleton, one of the first of many future media gardening celebrities. He encouraged people to take on an allotment and grow vegetables, such as leeks and sprouts, instead of only growing short-lived summer crops. Potatoes were also encouraged because of their long-term storage potential.

With post-war peace came the launch of the Peace Rose and the suburban garden returned to ornamental gardening. Until then most suburban dwellers were not car owners and having pored over nursery catalogues would wait for the delivery of seeds and plants by post. However, post-war affluence brought in car ownership and nurseries such as those in Crews Hill, Enfield, were turned into garden centres where gardeners could dispense with waiting not only for their seeds and plants but also for virtually all they needed for the garden. Arthur Brown’s of Crews Hill was among one of the country’s first nurseries to establish a garden centre in 1960.



Arthur Brown’s garden centre, Enfield, 1960s
Private Collection

As television gardening programmes, for example, ‘Gardeners’ World’ (first broadcast in 1969) have replaced radio gardening programmes – with the exception of the venerable ‘Gardener’s Question Time’ first broadcast in 1947 – internet gardening sites offering both advice and sales may be replacing the garden centre - and once again suburban gardeners wait for the delivery of their seeds and plants.

Using the Garden: work and play

Early villa gardens were used for traditional purposes of entertainment, play and display but as they responded to new middle-class ideals of home and family, their focus shifted towards accommodating children’s play and family games such as croquet. Altogether throughout the nineteenth century, the villa and then the suburban garden became spaces for women to claim, at least in part, as their own and as an extension of the creative aspects of their domestic life. By the mid nineteenth century, women were active gardeners in their own right, conventionally concerned with flower growing but in reality also mowing the lawn and tending vegetables. By the 1820s, botany and rare plant and insect collecting were increasingly popular and the garden also became a place of serious leisure for both men and women just as, for example, bird watching and counting are today. In turn, the iconic garden shed reminds us that the suburban garden, despite its shrinking size over the past two hundred years, is still a space for storage and messy household tasks as well as a space for personal (and usually male) retreat and contemplation much as the garden temple of earlier gardens.



Relaxing in the garden at Cambrey’s Road, Dagenham, c.1929
Private Collection

Owning a garden remains both a private privilege and a responsibility that extends beyond immediate neighbours to the wider public environment and landscape. Suburban gardens provide almost the only linked green space for (often endangered) British flora and fauna, purify the air and offer patches of land for water to drain in underground aquifers.

However, the status of privilege given to the suburban garden is rapidly declining. Government, official bodies and legislation have targeted it for a house building drive equal only to that launched after the First World War, which

subsequently led to the interwar building boom. The suburban garden was once, in ideal if not in reality, perceived as a miniature aristocratic or villa estate. Now, with its new “brown field” designation, the garden has officially acquired the same status as an industrial wasteland. How long the idea of a suburban landscape sustained by two centuries of domestic gardening can exist is open to question.

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Acknowledgements

Guest Curators (direction and development)

Elizabeth Lebas & Michael Ann Mullen,
Middlesex University

Co-guest Curators

Kristina Taylor & Jenny Turner

Additional Research

Britta Fuchs, Charlotte Hopkins, Fiona Ligonnet

Project Curator

Zoë Hendon,
Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

Contributors

Elaine Arkell, Barnard, Cook Wood & Loach, Barnet Local Studies Library, Betty Cannon, Graham Dalling, Peter Deering, Enfield Local Studies Library, David Hicks, Forty Hall, London Metropolitan Archives, London’s Transport Museum, Jenny Mann, Mr Martin, Jan Metcalf, Mr Mills, Eric Misselke, Museum of Garden History, Museum of London, Liz McNichol, Barty Philips, Enid Smith, Heather Turner, Kathleen Vyvyan, Pauline Wadl, Yasmin Webb, Jenifer White

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Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

Middlesex University, Cat Hill, Barnet, Herts, EN4 8HT
Tel 020 8411 5244 fax 020 8411 6639
e-mail moda@mdx.ac.uk www.moda.mdx.ac.uk
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THE **museum of domestic design & architecture**



In the nineteenth century, new transport links made it possible to live in the suburb and daily travel to work in London. What had been true for the earlier owners of large villas was also true for the new suburbanites at the end of the nineteenth century: the edges of London were wholesome places to live, away from the graft and grime of the city. Indeed, this is still perceived as the attraction of the suburbs today. However, this attraction is also the suburb's greatest vulnerability – the more people have settled in them, the more crowded they have become. By the end of the Victorian period, country places near the metropolis were turning into suburbs, and suburbs into inner suburbs, each in turn destined, if unprotected by legislation, to lose themselves into an ever-encroaching city.

Britain's general economic growth in the nineteenth century benefited in particular the new middle classes who, with their increased disposable incomes, were moving to the suburbs in order to establish themselves in society. Gardens were used as a means of demonstrating wealth and good taste and became middle class status symbols. A suburban 'gentleman' in Victorian England would have maintained both a flower garden and a large kitchen garden to provide for the house.

The expansion of the railways in the 1840s and 1850s had a large impact on gardens and gardening. Commercial growers from around the country were able to send their fruit, vegetables and flowers by rail to be sold in London. Produce and ornamental plants could also be imported from Europe. By the end of the nineteenth century, new developments in sea transport meant that 'exotic' fruits like oranges, pineapples and grapes, previously only enjoyed by the rich, who could afford to maintain large glasshouses, became more common in middle-class households. It therefore became less important for householders to grow fruit and vegetables at home. The gardens of newly built villas became smaller and consequently more affordable to the less well-off middle classes, also eager to establish themselves in the suburbs.

The Ideals of the Garden Suburb – municipalisation

In the nineteenth century the suburban landscape of villas was largely privately owned. In the early years of the twentieth century the establishment of municipal government enabled dwindling open spaces to be either bought by, or given to, local councils. Between the 1880s and 1930s, local and county councils acquired most of the open public spaces they have today. Boroughs like Barnet have as much as a third of their areas made up of protected open space and parkland.

The suburbs can be envisaged as a mostly residential zone of lesser density between the inner city and the countryside; a landscape ideally featuring detached houses with gardens front and back, tree-lined avenues with wide verges within a setting of public parks and gardens, allotments and playing fields.

As such, this landscape is the outcome of almost two hundred years of public debate, government reports and legislation about the importance of open spaces, the need to control living densities and the need to resist encroachment into the surrounding countryside. These include the 1833 Report by the Select Committee on Public Walks, the formation of the Open Spaces Society in 1865, the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association in 1877, the 1919 Housing Act, the Green Belt Act of 1938, and more recent concerns about the need for biodiversity on the one hand and the need for house building on the other.

The Garden Suburb Ideal

The first Garden Suburb was developed in Hampstead in 1907. Carefully planned at low living densities and incorporating private gardens and shared public spaces, its founders intended it to be a beautiful and healthy communal place for people from a mixture of social classes. These ideals came to underpin the suburban landscape as a model of civic life. They became compulsory in public housing legislation after the First World War.

The Watling Estate, near Burnt Oak in Barnet, is a key example of local authority housing built according to garden suburb principles. It can be seen as an expression of civic ideals made physical and municipal in the suburban landscape. Built by the London County Council between 1924 and 1930, it was intended to house some 4,000 families leaving the overcrowded slums of central London. Houses with private back gardens built at just over ten to the acre were recessed behind communal hedges and grass verges. Corner blocks of houses and flats were set at an angle. Streets, following the contour of the land, were lined with mature trees carefully preserved from the original farm landscape. Three public parks and several playing fields added to the sense of shared green space.



Watling Estate; the Silkstream Road from the banks of the Silkstream, 1927 Courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives

The suburban landscape has represented an ideal of modern civic life and has served as a setting of social and moral reform. Repeatedly contrasted with the dark, dangerous, overcrowded and unsanitary spaces of city slums, from its early beginnings it came to express somewhere distinctly separate from the workplace: a place

for a new kind of domesticity, at the centre of which were women and children. Centred on the ideal of a private space surrounding the home of each citizen being supported and protected by a wider communal landscape, the suburban landscape has come to be perceived as a place of rest and recreation, a place for the everyday life of like-minded citizens.

The Suburban Landscape as Private Realm: a Home with a Garden

Between the wars, in the 1920s and 1930s, legislation subsidizing private house building and easier mortgages for new houses made it possible for white collar workers and skilled tradesmen to buy a house, resulting in the building of almost three million private new homes. Furthermore, low prices for still relatively unregulated agricultural land encouraged landowners around cities to sell their estates at a time when new transport links (rail and underground) made it possible for workers to commute more cheaply and easily into the city to work.

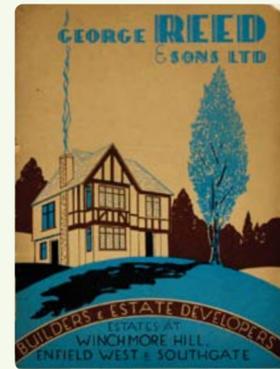
In Southgate in the 1930s the number of people and of new homes increased by one third as speculative developers bought up farms and villa estates. By the early twentieth century many large villa estates (Avenue House in Barnet or Grovelands House in Southgate among them), had been turned into public buildings or nursing homes, their parks transferred into municipal ownership. Other villa estates such as South Lodge (used as a school until the early 1930s), were sold off, the large houses demolished and the land used for housing development. Almost all the new homes built were for sale rather than for rental. They were laid out on regular plots - about a third of the way into the plot thus allowing for a small garden at the front and a larger one at the back



Illustrated catalogue featuring new types of semi detached and detached houses available on Laing's Enfield West estate, 1937 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture, Middlesex University

In 1935 planning permission was granted to Laing's, a major developer in the South East, to build 850 single family houses on the South Lodge estate with the stipulation

that trees be planted, existing open space be preserved and part of the estate be set aside as a public park. South Lodge estate, at first named the Enfield West Estate after the newly built tube station nearby (later renamed Oakwood station), was intended for comfortably off house buyers. Laing's brochure stressed how it was transforming an historic estate with connections to William Pitt the Elder, the Earl of Chatham and former royal hunting grounds into a beautiful residential garden, thus encouraging potential house buyers to associate with the area's aristocratic past. At the same time it stressed that the new estate was only a three-minute walk away from the tube station built in 1933. Thus the new residents could have the best of both worlds – aristocratic connections and modern transport.



George Reed & Sons Ltd brochure, 1936 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

Altogether, developers' brochures stressed the beauty and aristocratic connections of the surrounding landscape and public open spaces. A Laing brochure of what by 1940 had become known as the 'Southgate North' estate depicts it as a park – with not a house on it - while the brochure for George Reed and Sons who also developed houses in Southgate, boasted of the closeness of Trent Park and fine scenery of the area. However, what attracted suburban house buyers, and what defined the suburban house (and indeed, the whole of the suburban landscape), was the promise of a garden both front and back.



Image from Halifax Building Society leaflet, c 1935 Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

Set in what was represented as the historic remains of an aristocratic landscape, the private suburban garden as an actual physical space, or as an idealised or imaginary space with its limits defined by walls, fences or plants, came to represent an increasingly miniaturised ideal of genteel domestic life. In turn, the front garden as a private area separate from the street, yet visible to it, together with other front gardens were to be mutually visible and form part of the larger and collectively owned public landscape. As time has gone by, car ownership has meant that many front gardens have been turned into car parks and their relationship to the collective landscape has been lost in more ways than one.



Prize winning front garden, Watling Estate, 1931 Courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives

Between the time of the first census of 1801 and 1931, the population within a radius of ten miles from London's Charing Cross had grown by ten fold, while in the county of Middlesex it had grown by over twenty fold. By the early 1930s, overcrowding in central London was still severe while uncontrolled suburban growth was increasingly being perceived as a 'blot on the landscape'. The government response was to turn its attention to inner city slum clearance and public housing flat building, while endeavouring to curtail further suburban development by means of Green Belt and other legislation introduced in the late 1930s.

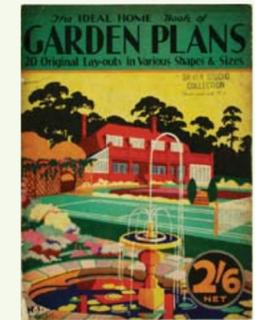
The suburban landscape as we know it, as an ideal of everyday family and civic life, as the outcome of the rises of new social classes and new means of transport in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was virtually completed by the beginning of the Second World War.

The "Ideal" Garden

The ideal garden has been made up of four key elements: the layout or design, the lawn, the plants and the ornaments or furniture. Despite superficial changes in appearance over the last two hundred years, these are still necessary and familiar elements of the typical suburban garden.

In the early 1800s, the grounds of a landed estate generally included a gracious drive, sweeps of lawn and carefully positioned trees and shrubberies. Landscape gardeners generally paid attention to the view beyond the grounds, and the garden often included a walled kitchen garden, glasshouses, an orchard and an ornamental flower garden

The gardens of villa residences such as South Lodge or Grovelands were effectively miniature versions of this. In the twentieth century, gardens became ever smaller as the price of land increased. Placing the house well into the plot to provide space for a front as well as a back garden, suburban gardens continued to retain most of these same elements, albeit on a smaller scale.



Ideal Home book of Garden Plans, 1930s Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture

For example, crazy paving, identified with the suburban garden almost as much as the lawn, provided a fashionable alternative to stone paving until the 1960s, when imitation stone pavers offered another low cost alternative. Package holidays to the Mediterranean introduced in the 1950s began to have an impact on the suburban garden as holidaymakers returned home inspired to make a patio in their garden. With the patio came patio furniture and the barbeque, and although plants were still being grown in the garden, the garden had become an "outdoor room". Since then, only the wooden deck has rivalled the patio as fashionable addition to the back garden, although television garden make over programmes have promoted more hard landscaping and accessories as suburbanites' disposable incomes have increased inversely to their disposable time.

Today the suburban garden is a place of leisure as well as of labour, a place for the consumption of goods and services as well as of the production of food and flowers.

Being a Gardener

The suburban garden has always involved participation on the part of its owners. Early villa dwellers sometimes designed their gardens and chose the plants, but left the gardening to professional gardeners and their labourers whereas today's garden owners garden themselves. Each new generation of suburban dwellers has been a generation of new gardeners responsible for the patch of land around their house and needing tools, plants, seeds and other specialist products – and most of all, needing advice.