The London Suburbs

2.1 The growth of the London suburbs

Haussmann’s rebuilding of Paris continues to define, to a large extent, the archetypal Parisian abode, which is why it formed the basis for the first chapter of this book. In the history of the London home of the same period, there is no Haussmann figure, no governmental authority whose dictates defined the contours of the urban home. There is still a sense, however, that a ‘typical’ London home emerged in this period, and it is the antitype of the Parisian apartment. It is telling that the urban home in London is, in contrast to that in Paris, suburban: the semi-detached or terraced suburban house, or – further up the social scale – the detached villa. This chapter examines the development of suburbia and suburban housing in relation to the town planning movement and then examines depictions and critiques of suburbia by H. G. Wells and George Orwell. These two writers are shown to have very different attitudes towards the suburbs, which become – in their work – key sites where the relationship between town and country is negotiated. Through these authors, it can be seen that questions about how land is to be inhabited – addressed in a different manner by the Town Planning movement – become central to English Literature and culture, and, for Wells and Orwell at least, such questions take on a vital political importance.

Suburbanisation is the result of a long and various trend in building and development. The two main boom periods were the last three decades of the 19th century and then the 1930s. There was no grand plan, and yet, as Helen Meller writes, in reference to the first phase of suburban development:
That the growth of cities took place without any conscious planning is probably one of the greatest myths ever perpetrated about Victorian Britain. That is because town planning has been perceived in terms of a government activity controlled by legislation.

(Meller 1997: 8)

Suburban London was to a large extent planned by a multifarious group of non-professionals, ‘deeply engaged in grappling with the social consequences of rapid growth’ (Meller 1997: 8). As Meller argues, to say that the suburbs were unplanned is a fallacy, and a common one, and this is as true of the 1930s boom as of the earlier, Victorian one. But suburbanisation was not the result of some unilateral governmental decree. There is a typological distinction to be made between a local, pragmatic planning and the centrally administered governmental version practised by Haussmann. Central government was scarcely ever involved in the planning of London in the 19th century. While Haussmann’s great achievement had been to conceptualise Paris as a whole, a single entity, and to regularise it according to that vision, in England ‘the first proposal for comprehensive treatment of the capital was not made until 1909, when John Burns introduced the Town Planning Bill’ (Choay 1969: 17). Instead, nineteenth-century London was subject to a piecemeal process of development and growth. On the housing side, the responsibility for the development and design of new housing was initially left to private investors, and was market-led. Suburbanisation was driven by the invisible hand.

Historically, London had resisted the very notion of the plan. After the great fire, Wren’s proposal for the rebuilding of the affected area had St Paul’s Cathedral as the focal point of a large precinct in the neoclassical style, with wide streets and plazas, the overall effect perhaps not too dissimilar to the grander areas of Haussmannian Paris. John Evelyn and Robert Hooke followed suit with their own grandiose efforts (Porter 2000: 109). Wren’s cathedral was built, but the rest of the area destroyed by fire was redeveloped as quickly as possible, and according to no systematic logic, to minimise the financial loss incurred by the affected landowners (Porter 2000: 110). This is partly because of differences in the structure of government that meant that in Britain the state had much less power to reshape the city than in France:

French officials, who benefited from the powers of a dictatorial, centralized government, were able to institute many of the changes they associated with England on a far grander scale than anything