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BACK TO THE FUTURE

**Griffiths, Sean (2004-07),
Back to the Future: Staying with the Suburban Ideal**

**A Housing Futures 2024 Social Scenario Paper written for the
Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment +
Royal Institute of British Architects 'Building Futures' Group**

January 2004 (with some later revisions)

Introduction:

The following paper takes the form of an imaginary newspaper article which, inspired by the 2023 Ideal Home Exhibition, takes a look at how well that exhibit meets the needs of housing in 2023. The Ideal Home Exhibition has historically reflected, fairly accurately, the housing preferences of a substantial proportion of the population, more so than has historically been the case with the visions of architects and planners. In particular, the exhibition has reflected and perhaps encouraged, the trend towards suburbanization that has been a major shaper of the urban and rural landscapes throughout the twentieth century. In this Social Scenario Paper, the trend is shown to have continued in the period up to 2023, despite the attempts of architects, planners and politicians to stimulate an 'Urban Renaissance'. This assumption is made on the basis of processes that have actually unfolded over the last hundred years and which show no sign of abating in 2003. The assumption is also informed by the experience of similar societies, such as the USA, where the process of suburbanization, and a number of other associated social trends, is more advanced.

Also taking its cue from the urban experience of the United States is a discussion of the effects of immigration on both inner-city and suburban housing. The paper argues that, by 2023, a process of middle-class flight from the inner cities will be well underway. It will be driven by factors such as, increasing privatisation of public services and large increases in levels of immigration. The inner cities will be home to a significant proportion of these new immigrants, who will appropriate the discarded urban fabric and adapt it to meet their needs.

The white middle classes will be joined in the expanding suburbs by members of established immigrant groups who, by 2023, have risen into the ranks of the middle class. This process and a number of other social factors, which are described in the paper, will effect a substantial change in both the physical fabric of the suburban landscape and social practices within it. However, these changes will manifest themselves subtly, particularly in respect of the appearance of housing, which will maintain its largely traditional aesthetic.

The article forms a critique of the Ideal Homes Exhibition, whose exhibits, whether in the form of "Houses of the Future", or the 2023 version of the suburban semi, are deemed to have failed to meet the social needs of the diverse communities of 2023

'A VIEW OF HOUSING NEEDS IN THE CONTEXT OF 2023'S IDEAL HOME EXHIBITION'

SURVEYING THE SCENE

The 2023 Ideal Home Exhibition is the first major event to take place in the new Olympia. Designed by the octogenarian architect, Lord Foster, it is the last project he completed before taking up his new role as Minister for the Future. Walking around the exhibition, one is struck by its centrepiece - the winner of this year's 'House of the Future' competition. This astonishing building is the first to be built using the state of the art CAC (computer-aided-casting) system. Aside from the mere impact of its startling appearance, the thing that has raised the eyebrows of architects is the explicit use of the metallic 'melting man' aesthetic, made possible by CAC, but first seen in a film called *Terminator* which older readers will remember starred none other than the recently re-elected president of the United States himself.

However new this particular 'House of the Future' looks, it fulfils two roles appropriate to houses of the future. The first is that houses of the future should always look futuristic. The second is that when the future actually arrives, houses of the future from the recent past should look rather silly, thus proving the rule that predicting the future is a precarious business.

THE ENDURANCE OF THE SUBURBAN IDEAL AND THE FAILURE OF THE URBAN RENAISSANCE

Another constant of the Ideal Home Exhibition is that the rest of the exhibits tend to represent values which are the opposite of the 'House of the Future'. The suburban ideal, which has been the mainstay of this exhibition since its founding at the beginning of the twentieth century, maintains its appeal. And whilst the model of the suburban house evolves over time, its image of brick walls and pitched roofs with sprinklings of fake half-timbering or rustic weather-boarding, remains, in essence, unchanged. Architects have never been comfortable with the success of these houses. One of the criticisms that might be made of their proposed alternatives, such as this year's 'House of the Future', is that they are derived perhaps more from wishful thinking than disinterested analysis of social trends. And social trends are at issue here, for the appearance of houses says much about the values, hopes and aspirations of the people who choose to live in them. In the case of the majority of houses shown in the Ideal Home Exhibition, the values expressed are not much liked by architects.

This year's exhibition shows us that, despite the great social, environmental, and technological changes we have witnessed over the last 20 years, little has changed in the aspirations and values of Middle England. Despite the pressures of environmental ideology and the exorbitant cost of land and housing, Middle England continues to yearn for the house surrounded by a bit of garden in a landscape, which, in the mind's eye at least, is still bucolic. This has meant that the trend towards urban sprawl and the suburban ideal, that many predicted, again perhaps through a little too much wishful thinking, would disappear, is still going strong. And the so-called 'Urban Renaissance' which many architects and urbanists hoped for twenty years ago, has, with the exception of London and a few trendy spots in the northern cities, largely failed to materialise.

Factors such as environmental, social and technological change have undoubtedly contributed to this failure, but could it also be a result of the continuing rejection of architects' values by those who inhabit mass housing? The social failure of many new types of houses dreamt up by architects in the 1990's and 2000's certainly raises this question. And it does seem as though the much heralded reinvigoration of Modernist housing that was inspired by the Dutch high-density housing boom of the 1990's has resulted in architects and planners repeating some of the mistakes of the 1960's. Prefabricated micro-flats, in particular, have proven to be lacking in adaptability for the new inhabitants of the inner city – the immigrant poor. Originally built for inner-city key workers, there are today very few key workers left to fill them. Those who work in the now largely privatised, health, police and fire services have tended to follow their paymasters to the suburbs. In contrast, types of inner-city housing that developed more organically, such as loft apartments, have proven more adaptable to social change. Like the fine inner-city Georgian and Victorian houses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these former homes of the wealthy have been abandoned to poorer immigrant groups, as the wealthy flee the increasing social polarisation, attendant crime and exorbitant congestion charges of the inner city. Such properties, somewhat ironically given the image of foot-loose and fancy-free bachelor life with which they were once associated, have proven to be ideal places for immigrant communities and their large extended families to inhabit. However, the 'open plan' lifestyle celebrated by the previous occupiers has been replaced by a more flexible maze of rooms, creating warren-like environments, which, accommodate the demands of living, sleeping, eating, reproducing and – importantly – working.

The inhabitants of these spaces, offered no support by the social security system, seek to eke out a living amongst themselves, causing the buildings to spawn innumerable cottage industries including manufacturing, schooling and farming. As a result, certain sections of our inner cities have begun to look more like the old walled city of Kowloon in Hong Kong than a traditional British city, whilst others are deserts of desolation, either in the form of uninhabited wastelands, or in the equally grim and lifeless gated communities which protect the few remaining wealthy urbanites from those who free them of drudgery.

THE NEW SUBURB

None of this, of course, is represented in this year's Ideal Home Exhibition, but in many ways, the exhibition continues to represent significant social trends in housing. And one of the consequences of the increasing social polarisation caused by the ever-growing gap between rich and poor, is an increase in the process of suburbanization. This 'white flight', mirroring that which took place in the latter years of the last century in the cities of the United States, began with the middle-class abandonment of inner-city schools, which, at the beginning of the century, were becoming increasingly dominated by immigrant groups, for many of whom, English was a second language. However this flight has not only been white. Discrimination against new immigrant groups, made up of illegal economic migrants and environmental refugees, is unfortunately still with us. But going hand-in-hand with this has been a greater acceptance and assimilation of existing immigrant groups who became established, at or before the turn of the last century, into the new citadels of Middle England. However, these immigrant groups remain unrepresented in the Ideal Home Exhibition, despite the fact that they are making a considerable contribution to the creation of the new suburbia.

In many ways, it is difficult to maintain the idea that twenty-first century suburbia is suburban in the twentieth century sense at all. The distinction between the urban and the suburban has always been ambiguous. But the transformation of the suburban into the urban has, in the past, been predicated on the annexing of the suburb by the expanding city. In 2023, as cities in the developed world (in marked contrast to those in the developing world) decrease in size, the suburban centres have become more and more physically estranged from the urban centres to which they were once inextricably linked.

Today, the so-called suburban centres have no need to relate to a larger centre at all. The increased tendency to work from home, for people to grow their own food and even keep animals in their suburban gardens, has reduced the need for a relationship with the city. People living in the suburbs can nowadays find most of what they immediately need within walking distance. What they can't get near to home, they, or their domestic appliances, can order electronically. Given the extent to which our lives depend on technology, it is ironic that, rather than the futuristic visions exemplified by the 'House of the Future', the model for the way the towns have been laid out, and the appearance of the houses, at least in their initial state, is much more traditional. The closest model to the New Suburb is the New Urbanism, an idea developed in the United States towards the end of the last century. Based on an idealised view of 'Small Town' America, this is perhaps an appropriate image, as it is in suburban centres, which in the twentieth century were characterised as 'sprawl', that a new sense of community has grown. This is in marked contrast to the inner cities. These new communities enjoy all the strengths that ideal communities are meant to have: namely, they possess a strong sense of collective belonging, a strong sense of public duty, and a collective inclination towards self-help. They also suffer some of the weaknesses of ideal or traditional communities – a certain insularity and conservatism which expresses itself in the mistrust of outsiders and a fear of the poor.

Only 30 years ago, those who found themselves contemplating the birth of the internet age and other new technologies of communication would have found it difficult to imagine that future communities would be like this. For that generation, electronic communication was the force that would bring people together. We were going to be one great 'Global Village', not a million little ones. A less predictable consequence of the electronic revolution of the late-twentieth century has been the gradual rebellion against electronic culture. Not that people don't engage with it. On the contrary, the amount of transactions, whether emotional, social or business that are carried out electronically or virtually, without any form of human contact has never been higher. But because of this, people tend to yearn for human contact and seek it out in their communities. This nostalgia for collective identity and interaction is another factor in the re-emergence of the very traditional imagery in the architecture of these communities.

This tendency towards traditional tastes has been exacerbated by other factors also unforeseen by the prophets of the electronic 'Global Village'. Technologies such as the internet, cell phones and laptop computers seem quaint now. But when they came in to use, they were perceived as agents of what was then called globalisation, a process that contributed to the increasing privatisation of public services. Young people today who have never known a world where public services existed would no doubt be amused to learn that things like transport, health and education were once provided by local government and other agents of the state. But the communities they live in today might have been very different if past governments had succeeded in delivering their promises on improved public services. Had that happened, perhaps we would have been living in the results of the 'Urban Renaissance' that was much-heralded 20 or so years ago.

This is particularly true in respect of transport. The eventual handing over the building of high-speed rail networks entirely to private sector meant that connections to the financial and business centres of the UK and Europe have become exorbitantly expensive. If the kids of today are amused, as they skateboard about in their quaint environs, by the idea of public ownership, then people who were young in the 1990's find it incredible that railways are now the playthings of the rich. The prohibitive cost of motoring and flying has meant that, in a way that would have been unbelievable 20 years ago in the age of EasyJet, people, particularly from the kind of middle class-communities being described, travel considerably less today than they did two decades ago. The fact that a majority of the small-town population are working locally, if not from home, together with the availability of instant electronic communications, means that apart from their annual holiday, people have much less inclination to physically travel outside of their own communities.

THE ASSIMILATION OF ETHNIC GROUPS

The image of a 1950's American community that today's UK suburban towns appear to portray reflects that which is depicted in the majority of the exhibits in the Ideal Home Exhibition. However, there is one major difference between the middle-class communities of 2023 and those of the 1950's. The difference is in the effect of immigration and the resultant ethnic make-up of suburbs.

The mass immigration of economic migrants from Eastern Europe and environmental refugees from Africa and Asia has contributed to two substantial effects. One is the greater polarisation between rich and poor. The other is the displacement, and to a large extent acceptance, of already established immigrant communities into the new suburbs. The transformation in the politics of race has been astonishing. White-skinned Eastern Europeans are trapped in inner-city ghettos and suffer poverty, lack of basic services and discrimination. At the same time, the UK has a black Conservative Prime Minister and well-established immigrants of African, Asian and West Indian descent make major contributions to the life of Middle England.

This process of ethnic assimilation into the landscape of the semi-detached house has been going on for some time. Twenty years ago, the film *Bend it like Beckham* brought to the fore many of the issues pertinent to the integration of ethnic communities into Middle England. These included the changing perception of male and female roles, the relations between different ethnic groups and their established traditions, and the extent and limits of ethnic groups' willingness to assimilate. The outcome of the film suggested a happy ending with an eventual acceptance, by the ethnic families, of the values of the indigenous community - individual liberty, appropriation of western values and acceptance of complex gender roles. The reality of the continuing assimilation of these groups into traditionally white environments is more complex and subtle. The Ideal Home Exhibition, whether in its 'House of the Future' mode or its traditional suburban/rustic dream mode, takes no account of these developments. For example, nearly all the house types exhibited are single-family dwellings and take no account of the fact that many immigrant groups do not live in this way. Many groups use the home not only as a living place, but also as a workplace. It is a fact that a majority of new business that have began trading in the last 20 years have done so in suburban areas. A significant proportion of these are operated from home. A significant proportion of these are businesses started by first- or second-generation immigrants, and a significant proportion of these are run by women.

Both the 'House of the Future' exhibit and the more traditional houses display an equal level of conservatism. Both of them anachronistically reflect different aspects of white middle-class values. On the one hand, the 'House of the Future', for all its futuristic aesthetic hubris and integration of electronic gadgetry, reflects the values of architects, still in 2023 largely male, white and middle class. On the other hand, the array of detached and semi-detached houses that make up the rest of the exhibition, reflect an ideal of nuclear white middle-class family life, that bears little relation to the reality of today's UK.

For example, a typical Bengali household might contain one set of grandparents, two sets of parents, each with three or four children. That makes for a possibility of 16 people occupying a single household typically containing two ground floor rooms, a kitchen, one or two bathrooms, and two-and-a-half bedrooms. The fact that a number of these families are using the home as a business premises, means that many of the rooms have to become multi-functional spaces, part-bedroom and part-office.

However a number of factors have allowed for the accommodation of such scenarios. For a start, the suburban semi has proven to be surprisingly adaptable to these new conditions. The wide frontages of these houses allow for very large extensions, running across the full width of the house, often at two storeys in height. Spaces over the attached garages have also been infilled, as have the garages themselves, since people have given up personal ownership of a vehicle on the basis that most of what they need is in easy reach online or within walking distance. The development of closely-knit communities has also encouraged the use of the community car pool system, whereby hydrogen fuel and electrically powered cars are loaned from the pool to members of the community as and when they are needed.

In an entirely unexpected way, the massive increase in the cost of housing has made the possibility of this kind of occupation of the house more likely. The collapse of the pension market in the late 2000's, combined with the stock market boom of the 2010's, led to a level of investment in property which outstripped even that of the 1990's and 2000's. This had two effects: a huge increase in the price of property, making owning a home increasingly difficult for the average person; and secondly, a large increase in the number of landlords offering houses for rent. Whilst owning property maintains its appeal as a form of investment, the sheer number of properties in the rental market has kept rents within the suburbs at a reasonable level. As a result, for the middle classes, housing has become the great leveller, as both indigenous whites not already on the property ladder, and immigrants groups have been forced into renting. However, at the same time, these groups are still able to afford reasonably generous rented properties.

Landlords have been quicker to recognise the need for the development of new house types than either architects or housebuilders, both of whom still have a lot to learn from the way that landlords have extended and altered the traditional suburban semi to accommodate the needs of immigrant groups. Perhaps the tendency of the housebuilders to maintain the single family unit as the house type *par excellence* has also to do with a latent racism, reflected in a reluctance to embrace the needs of what is still seen, subconsciously, as a series of alien cultures which have located themselves within the space of Middle England.

Another factor which might easily have discouraged the alteration of the physical fabric of houses is the decreasing level of owner-occupation. This has not proven to be the case, as the immigrant influx into these suburban, middle-class neighbourhoods has had a profound impact both on the physical fabric of the neighbourhood and social practice.

Within its streets we are seeing different uses of space. Encouraged by the habits of ethnic groups and by the fact the UK's climate has become warmer over the last 20 years, suburban streets, whose occupation by people would have in the past inspired the twitching of net curtains, are now social meeting spaces. Front gardens and garden walls fronting onto the street are appropriated for this use. The front garden, once a display case for horticultural enthusiasts, has become an important interface between public, semi-public and private space. In streets where particular ethnic groups dominate, the front garden has become a shopfront, a place where business is done and things are sold. This practice is also linked to the fact that back gardens, when not filled by large house extensions to accommodate the extended family, are increasingly places given over to work. Hence, the separation between work and domestic life, which had traditionally been a key characteristic of the suburb, has disintegrated and the relationships between domestic, private and public spaces have become more complex.

In this and many other ways, the impact of immigrant groups on housing has been less a function of physical alteration, and more a function of use. But that is not to say that physical transformation has not happened. We have already seen how houses have been extended and have colonised their gardens with outbuildings. But from the street, the physical differences are often more muted and nuanced. Whilst the facades look in many ways like typical English suburban houses, incorporating bay windows, shingles, half-timbering, weather-boarding and the like, small clues exist as to the nature of the inhabitants. These take the form of signs, window displays, treatments of gardens, walls, balconies, ornamental additions, and even garden furniture and the way it is laid out. This more subtle expression of the immigrant presence within these communities perhaps communicates the self-imposed limits of expression that such ethnic groups have taken on board in their attempts to assimilate. It also shows that within the context of housing, due to the conservatism and lack of responsiveness of the various providers of housing, this kind of place-making has had to happen within an already built and difficult to transform physical fabric. But this reticence may change. One sure sign of assimilation is the extent to which the indigenous community has begun to ape the habits of immigrants. This is particularly true of the young, for whom, in the long hot British summers particularly, the British suburban street has become a place of intense social exchange and activity.

Throughout this article we have criticised the failure of both the visionary architect and the conservative housebuilder to provide houses that meet the needs of 2023. And we have seen the extraordinary way in which the existing housing stock has developed, evolved and adapted itself to meet new needs. What we have also seen is that, although house types in their original forms have changed very little in the period, through the physical alteration of the existing building stock, new typologies have emerged. These have ranged from the transformation of loft buildings in the inner cities into multi-functional, multi-family warrens, to the adaptation of the suburban semi into an extended agglomeration of rooms, accommodating a multitude of uses. We have also seen that these processes have been driven to a large extent by the impact of different types of immigration – primary immigration into the inner cities, and secondary immigration of established ethnic groups into the suburbs.

In 2023, there remains a great polarisation between these increasingly isolated urban ecosystems. But both, ironically, resemble architects' visions from the last century. The inner city, with its mix of citadel-like corporate office complexes sitting next to teeming residential complexes, clad in a mixture of junk, steam and hung-out washing, looks something like the Los Angeles depicted in the 1980's film *Bladerunner*. Architects of the

time particularly admired this film. And a kind of 'Urban Renaissance' has taken place over the last 20 years. It just isn't the one that visionary architects at the beginning of the century wanted or envisaged. However, what has in fact developed is surprisingly reminiscent of one visionary dream which originated at the beginning of the twentieth century. For the suburbs, with their ethnic mix, self sufficiency and decreasing individual home ownership, are increasingly reminiscent of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City, the first of which was realised exactly 120 years ago.

The bastard offspring of the Garden City, born of the unholy marriage of Howard's vision and the internal combustion engine, was the sprawling suburb – the dominant urban form of the twentieth century and, to date, of the twenty-first century. Many at the beginning of this present century hoped such environments would have fallen out of favour by now. But the 2023 Ideal Home Exhibition demonstrates that the suburban dream is very much alive, and that, on the surface at least, things appear to have changed very little in the last two decades in the garden of Middle England, whose inhabitants still seek escape from the city. As always, they do not disdain the conveniences and entertainments which our electronic world provides, but they do like to hide the gadgetry in a shell that evokes an idealised Arcadian vision of British life. However, below the surface, the make-up of Middle England has changed in a way unimaginable at the turn of the century. The same cannot be said of the architects, who still yearn for a different future, but whose visions remain marooned in the future.

Sean Griffiths
January 2004, with subsequent revisions



The original suburban live/work unit?
Frank Lloyd Wright's own house/office in Oak Park, Chicago



Classic suburbia from inter-war Middle England.
RAF officer's housing at Upper Heyford, Oxfordshire



The Arcadian ideal: picturesque gardens and pavilions at Stourhead



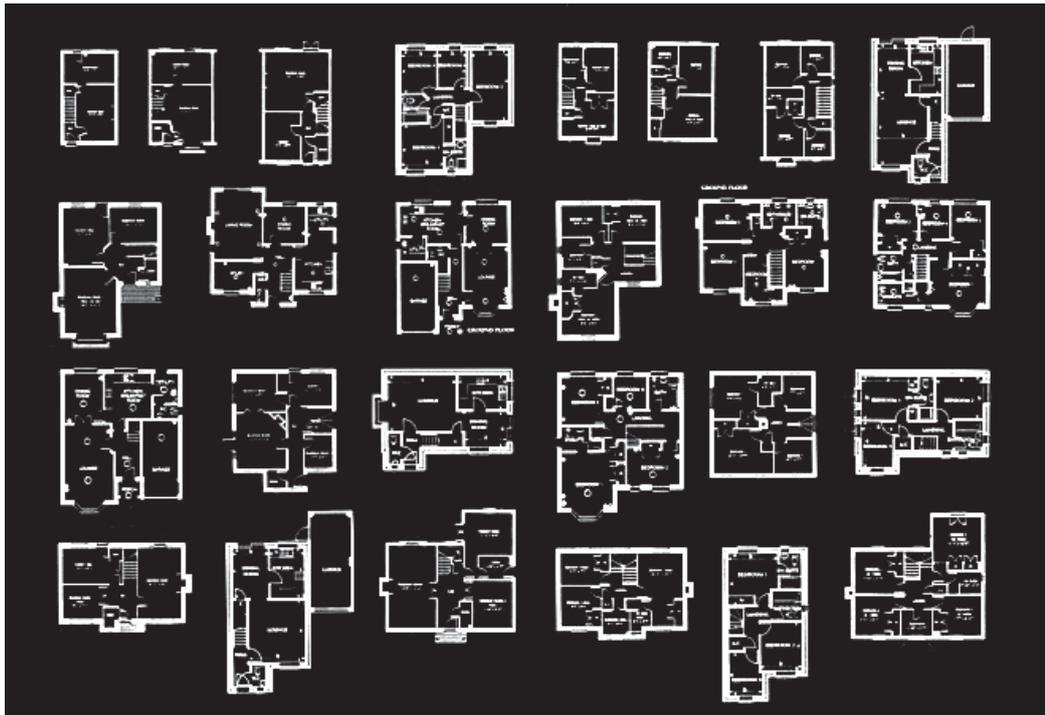
The suburban version: Hampstead Garden Suburb



Radburn, New Jersey



Radburn-style suburbia at Stevenage New Town



1990's suburbia, British style: typical housebuilders' plan types



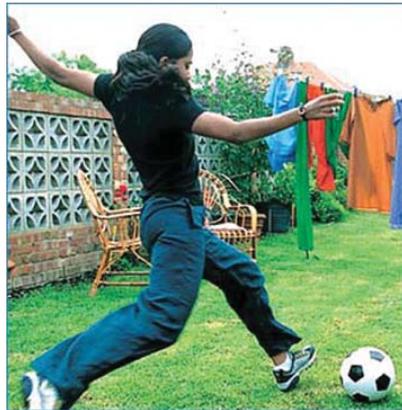
1990's suburbia, American style: house in Celebration, Florida



Poundbury, Dorset with official visitors



Poundbury, Dorset without official visitors



Suburbia gets a makeover:
Bend it Like Beckham (2002)

HOUSING FUTURES 2024

A PROVOCATIVE LOOK AT FUTURE TRENDS IN HOUSING

BUILDING FUTURES



Brochure on *Housing Futures 2024* produced by RIBA 'Building Futures' Group

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BACK TO THE FUTURE: STAYING WITH THE SUBURBAN IDEAL SEAN GRIFFITHS FAT

SUMMARY

This imaginary newspaper article considers how, over the decades, the *Ideal Home* Exhibition has more accurately reflected the housing preferences of the majority than the visions of architects and planners. In particular, the exhibition has anticipated the trend towards suburbanisation that has been a major shaper of the urban and rural landscapes throughout the twentieth century. This trend is shown to have continued in the period up to 2024, despite the attempts of architects,

planners and politicians to stimulate an urban renaissance. This assumption is made on the basis of processes that have actually unfolded over the last hundred years and which show no sign of abating in 2024. The assumption is also informed by the experience of similar societies, such as the USA, where the process of suburbanisation, and a number of other associated social trends, are more advanced.

Also taking its cue from the urban experience of the

United States, is a discussion of the effects of immigration and the changing culture of communities, and the impact on both inner city and suburban housing. By 2024, a process of middle class flight from the inner cities will be well underway. It will be driven by factors such as increasing privatisation of public services and large increases in levels of immigration. The inner cities will be home to a significant proportion of the new unskilled immigrants, who will appropriate the discarded urban fabric and adapt it to meet their needs.

The middle class will be joined in the expanding suburbs by established immigrant groups, who have also risen to the ranks of the middle class. This process and a number of other social factors will effect a substantial change in both the physical fabric of the suburban landscape and the social practices within it. However, these changes will manifest themselves subtly, particularly in respect of the appearance of housing, which will maintain its largely traditional aesthetic.

EXTRACT

This year's exhibition shows us that despite the great social, environmental, and technological changes we have witnessed over the last 20 years, little has changed in the aspirations, and values of Middle England. Despite the pressures of environmental ideology and the exorbitant cost of land and housing, Middle England continues to yearn for the house surrounded by a bit of 'garden' in a landscape, which, in the mind's eye at least, is still a rural ideal. This has meant that the trend towards urban sprawl and the suburban ideal, that many predicted would disappear, again perhaps through a little too much wishful thinking, is still going strong. And the so-called urban renaissance, which many architects and urbanists hoped for twenty years ago, has with the exception of London and a few trendy spots in the northern cities, largely failed to materialise.

Environmental and social factors, together with technological change, have undoubtedly contributed to this failure, but could it also be a result of the continuing rejection of architects' values by those who inhabit mass housing? The social failure of many new types of houses dreamt up by architects in the 1990s and 2000s certainly raises this question. And it does seem as though the much heralded reinvention of Modernist housing that was inspired by the Dutch high-density housing boom of the 1990s has resulted in architects and planners repeating some of the mistakes of the 1960s. Prefabricated micro-flats, in particular, have proved to be lacking in adaptability for the new inhabitants of the inner city – those on the lowest incomes and the immigrant poor.

Originally built for inner city key workers, there are today very few key workers left to fill them. Those who work in the now largely privatised health, police and fire services have tended to follow their paymasters to the suburbs.

In contrast, types of inner city housing that developed more organically, such as loft apartments have proven more adaptable to social change. Like the fine inner city Georgian and Victorian houses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these former homes of the wealthy have been abandoned to poorer immigrant groups, as the wealthy flee the increasing social polarisation, crime and exorbitant congestion charges of the inner city. Such properties, somewhat ironically given the image of foot-loose and fancy-free bachelor life with which they were once associated, have proven to be ideal places for immigrant communities, accommodating a range of household sizes to inhabit. However, the 'open-plan' lifestyle celebrated by the previous occupiers, has been replaced by a more flexible maze of rooms, creating warren-like environments that accommodate the demands of living, sleeping, eating, reproducing and – importantly – working. The inhabitants of these spaces, offered no support by the social security system, seek toeke out a living amongst themselves, causing the buildings to spawn innumerable cottage industries including manufacturing, schooling and farming. As a result, certain sections of our inner cities have begun to look more like the old walled city of Kowloon in Hong Kong, than a traditional British city, whilst others are deserts of desolation, either in the form of uninhabited wastelands, or in the equally grim and lifeless gated communities, which protect the few remaining wealthy urbanites from those who free them of drudgery.