

# NICK HUBBLE

## The Liminal Persistence of Interwar Suburbs in the Twenty-First Century

### 1. The ‘Forgotten Suburbs’

In 1937, by which time it was already clear that Britain and Europe were on the cusp of cataclysmic change, George Orwell wrote that it was ‘the memory of working-class interiors ... that reminds me that our age has not been altogether a bad one to live in’.<sup>1</sup> However, less than five years later he was celebrating the emergence of a new lifestyle in the suburbs built around London during the interwar period:

After 1918 there began to appear something that had never existed in England before: people of indeterminate social class. In 1910 every human being in these islands could be “placed” in an instant by his clothes, manners and accent. This is no longer the case [...] The place to look for the germs of the future England is in the light-industry areas and along the arterial roads. In Slough, Dagenham, Barnet, Letchworth, Hayes – everywhere, indeed, on the outskirts of great towns – the old pattern is gradually changing into something new. In those vast new wildernesses of glass and brick the sharp distinctions of the older kind of town, with its slums and mansions, or of the country, with its manor-houses and squalid cottages, no longer exist. There are wide gradations of income but it is the same kind of life that is being lived at different levels, in the labour-saving flats or Council houses, along the concrete roads and in the naked democracy of the swimming pools. It is a rather restless, cultureless life, centring round tinned food, *Picture Post*, the radio and the internal combustion engine [...] To that civilisation belong the people who are

most at home in and most definitely *of* the modern world, the technicians and the higher-paid skilled workers, the airmen and their mechanics, the radio experts, film producers, popular journalists and industrial chemists. They are the indeterminate stratum at which the older class distinctions are beginning to break down.<sup>2</sup>

As we enter into the second decade of the twenty-first century, we face an even more fundamental transformation of our everyday life in the form of the twin global crises of climate change and financial meltdown. This article considers some aspects of that suburban lifestyle which emerged in the interwar years before becoming culturally dominant at the end of the twentieth century and assesses whether our age was likewise not altogether a bad one to live in.

The history and culture of the iconic ‘suburban semi’, which characterised the interwar developments, is celebrated by Paul Oliver, Ian Davis and Ian Bentley in *Dunroamin* (1981). The sheer scale of these developments was enormous:

While the population of Central London slightly declined the suburbs spread dramatically, with the outer ring of the city growing over three million to nearly four in the Twenties. Encouraged by the policies of the London Passenger Transport Board, the suburban railway lines extended ever more deeply into the country [...] Expansion of the Underground system ‘over-ground’ further consolidated the new suburbs. In West London many areas increased rapidly in the ten years before 1931, Hendon doubling by over 100 per cent to 115,000. Hayes increased its population one and a half times, Wembley trebled, while Kingsbury increased from a small community of some two thousand people to eight times its former size. In the following decade the rates of growth were even greater.<sup>3</sup>

With over four million houses being built in Britain between the wars, it is perhaps not surprising that a backlash developed against this ‘suburban sprawl’ which according to its critics, destroyed the countryside, undermined the cities and ‘created an environment lacking in human warmth or dignity’.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, it is a matter of history that, during and after the Second World War, such critical views gained

ascendancy and led, via measures such as the formation of the Green Belt and the passing of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, to the abrupt curtailment of the laissez-faire interwar building boom and the acceptance from the late 1950s onwards of high-rise development as the answer to Britain's housing problems – a policy which proved to have disastrous social consequences.<sup>5</sup> However, much of the antipathy to the suburbs was to the values 'of home, of family, of stability and of individualism' they materially symbolised in contradistinction to the 'machine-for-living-in' aesthetic of the Continental Modern Movement.<sup>6</sup>

While such suburban values can be portrayed as conservative or even reactionary, this is to miss the gender implications of the physiognomy of the suburban house: 'The swelling bosom of the bay windows combined to communicate maternal warmth. Such curves dominated the necessarily rectilinear elements in the façade so that the swelling breasts of the bays eclipsed the masculine associations of a rigid formalism.'<sup>7</sup> This was a matriarchal culture in which the only phallic symbols on display were the garden gnomes – often grouped around a vaginal pond: 'Together they express[ed] territoriality, the determination to settle and to populate the earth within the domain of Dunroamin.'<sup>8</sup> This public fertility display represented a new hope in British society of escaping not just the horrors of the First World War and the Depression, but also the class stratifications and inequalities of the earlier Victorian era. The utopian promise of a golden classless future just around the corner was encapsulated by the sunray motif of the garden gate and the stained-glass galleon on the front door:

Whether the boat was embarking on a new venture, or sailing into port was not clear; the owner could project himself into either interpretation of the scene. Essentially the ship carried himself and his family and for this reason it was important that he should not feel it was sailing away from

him. With one or two sails billowing in full, pregnant shapes, the 'galleon', as it was usually termed, rode high on a tumbling sea.<sup>9</sup>

In 1946, there was no doubt in the mind of J.M. Richards, that this was the future for which many had fought fascism during the Second World War and to which others aspired: 'The picture we have been painting [of the English suburban residence and its garden] is the picture the ordinary Englishman has in his mind when he is away at the war, or travelling about on business or living in digs in the middle of town till such time as he can afford a home of his own.'<sup>10</sup> In later years, the utopian possibilities of the suburbs were retrospectively celebrated as, for example, in the scene from R.F. Delderfield's 1958 novel, *The Avenue Goes to War* in which two neighbours, who significantly had been on opposing sides during the General Strike of 1926, turn their back gardens into a common space:

Harold said 'it's a pity we can't have it in two gardens old man!'  
 'Well and why can't we?' asked Jim suddenly  
 'There's the Fence!'  
 'Then the hell with the fence' retorted Jim.

....

The symbolic levelling of the fence, with Jim swinging a 14lb sledge hammer at the Verandah end, and Harold at the nursery end was a spectacular opening to a party that, from its outset, proved the most joyful and uninhibited in the Avenue's history.<sup>11</sup>

However, in reality, this potential golden future was eclipsed by a rival utopian development: the largely unheralded election of the Labour party and the foundation of the Welfare State. The scope of the transition entailed by the 1945 political settlement has been cogently stated by the historian Ross McKibbin:

By the end of the 1930s the Conservative Party had created a huge, heterogeneous, but stable coalition. There was nothing to suggest it was provisional; everything to suggest it was a natural historical outcome. The only obvious threats to it were external. In this sense the Second World

War threw British history, and even more, English history, off course [...] More or less everyone in the interwar years agreed that England was a democracy. The question was – whose democracy? Before the outbreak of war the question seemed to have been answered [...] the ruling definition of democracy was individualist and its proponents chiefly a modernised middle class; in the 1940s the ruling definition was social-democratic and its proponents chiefly the organised working class. The class, therefore, which in the 1930s was the class of progress became in the 1940s the class of resistance.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the memory of that suburban utopia lingered culturally in the residual traces of middlebrow culture, such as Delderfield's novel, and eventually re-emerged in the late 1990s in New Labour's vision of 'Middle England'. This was all about ensuring, in the words of one of its key architects, Philip Gould, that the 'the politics of the suburbs' – 'the progress and well-being of individuals and their families' – did not remain 'forgotten'.<sup>13</sup> By voting Labour after eighteen years of Conservative rule, a new classless era would dawn for the suburban new middle classes: 'the aspirational classes – working-class achievers and the middle class under pressure ... estimated by the British Social Attitudes survey to comprise 50 per cent of the population'.<sup>14</sup> However, from the perspective of 2010, as Labour struggle in the opinion polls with an election imminent, the promised 'progressive century' looks increasingly unlikely to last for any longer than twelve ultimately disappointing years.<sup>15</sup> The greatest irony of this failure is, of course, that the high point of New Labour's attempt to align their target suburban new middle classes into a cohesive political movement was on 15 February 2003, when two million of them marched against the imminent invasion of Iraq by Britain and the United States. Once that overture had been rejected, any prospects of a lasting progressive alliance immediately began to recede. Yet, in any case, such prospects were always doomed. In part, this was because all New Labour had to offer the 'forgotten suburbs' was the materialist consumerism of 'better houses, better holidays, better lives'.<sup>16</sup> However, as

was to be revealed by the televised cultural experiment of Channel 4's *The 1940s House* (2001; screened in the run up to the end of the Party's first electoral term), even the utilisation of sunray symbolism in a direct appeal to the suburban utopian impulse would have fared no better in the long run.

## **2. *The 1940s House***

In 2000, the Hymers family from West Yorkshire moved into an interwar semi-detached house in the South East London suburb of West Wickham to relive the experience of the Second World War telescoped into nine weeks, while being filmed by Channel 4. The resultant series and accompanying book of the same title, written by a leading historian of the period, Juliet Gardiner, were popular; but lasting cultural significance has been cemented by the continued presence of a full-scale replica of the house in the Imperial War Museum since 14 December 2000.<sup>17</sup> If one compares this success with the poor reception of the contemporary Millennium Dome, in which zones such as 'Shared Ground' – a full-scale replica of a suburban row of shops sponsored by Camelot, the firm which runs the National Lottery – appeared to be deliberately mocking suburban values, then the cultural centrality of suburban life to Britain at the turn of the Millennium comes into focus.

The location chosen for *The 1940s House* provided a textbook history of the interwar suburb. At the end of the First World War, West Wickham was still a rural village with a population of 1,300 but, following the electrification of the railway in 1925, it had mushroomed into a typical suburban development of some 20,000 inhabitants by the late 1930s. The house was in Braemar Gardens, built in 1932 by the builders Bradfield Bros and Maybery and originally sold for £875 freehold. The enduring value placed on such properties is reflected in the fact that during 1999,



*Fig.1 Design on paper bag from Imperial War Museum (Nick Hubble)*

when bought for the programme, it was on the market for £187, 000.<sup>18</sup> By the time of the housing market crash of 2007-08, it would have been worth well over £300,000 and may well have regained similar value by now.

The house was lovingly restored to its original condition. The frontispiece and title page of Gardiner's book prominently display the sunray design of the house's gates and the stained-glass window of its front door. This latter is not a galleon, but another common motif of the period: a budding rose. As with the account Paul Oliver gives of the equally popular peacock motif, the rose is displayed at the top of a 'glowing vaginal shape' and holds the promise of one day opening out into its full glory.<sup>19</sup> This utopian symbolism is liberally combined throughout both the book and the series with iconic Second World War imagery to connote a distilled Britishness: the top corner of every page in the book is adorned with a floating Union Jack. During the war itself, defiance to the threat of air-raids and invasion became embodied in recognisably working-class figures as the dominant form of culturally representing Britishness, as memorably described by Mass-Observation co-founder, Tom Harrisson:

The simple working man, usually the Cockney, and in nine cases out of ten either a char lady or a taxi driver. This character usually speaks for the unshakeable people of Britain, untainted by Communism, and for that matter untainted by anything else, except a pint of beer or an occasional bomb story in which the Cockney invariably shows heroic stoic qualities.<sup>20</sup>

On the face of it, the achievement of *The 1940s House* was to succeed, where earlier attempts such as Delderfield's novel had failed, in supplanting the dominant working-class imagery of wartime Britain with a revisionist history in which defiant Britishness retrospectively becomes embodied in the suburban new middle classes.<sup>21</sup>



This effect was supported by the instant one-nation appeal that comes from situating an engaging West Yorkshire family in a South-East London suburb, while utilising carefully-framed shots of the Parish Church and adjacent farmland to add some additional timeless rural imagery.

Angus Calder's 1991 study *The Myth of the Blitz* provides a useful point of reference for determining exactly what is at stake in this kind of revisionist history. Calder argues that the relative uniqueness of three British wartime experiences – the bombardment of the Blitz,<sup>22</sup> the mass evacuation of troops from Dunkirk and the aerial Battle of Britain – support 'a myth of British or English moral pre-eminence, buttressed by British unity'.<sup>23</sup> Not to put too fine a point on it, harnessing the spirit of the myth of the Blitz, or demonstrating the 'Dunkirk spirit', in Britain is the equivalent of demonstrating divine leadership anywhere else in the world. The same set of associations can potentially be used to legitimate widely different political visions of society and the only question is whether the claim can be made successfully. The immediate context for Calder's book was exactly such a successful invocation of the wartime British spirit by the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher during and after the Falklands War of 1982, which led to a landslide victory in the General Election of 1983.<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, Calder identifies the origins of Thatcherism as lying in the interwar suburbs. He begins this section of his book by sharply criticising the bland sentimentality of *The Avenue Goes to War*:

Delderfield's rhetoric has the sickly flavour of complete, obtuse sincerity. An enormous readership could accept it because they, like him, took the myth for granted. Of course a commuter was naturally heroic. The valour of such men, struggling in to work had been clearly celebrated by writers and film-makers during the Blitz. London's suburbs had been, somehow, glorious in war (173).<sup>25</sup>

He then goes on to quote the film-maker John Boorman, who in his preface to the script of his own suburban war film, *Hope and Glory* (1987), makes the self-admission: ‘I was born at No.50 Rosehill Avenue, Carshalton, a monotonous street of those semi-detached suburban houses of which four million were built between the wars.’<sup>26</sup> Several pages later, Calder reveals that his interest in Boorman comes from the fact that he himself ‘was born, in 1942, in a suburb adjacent to Carshalton. I share his sense of shame about such origins [...]’.<sup>27</sup> What is this shame? Calder quotes Boorman on ‘the historic implications of the rise of “semi-suburbia”’:

They all missed it (or got it wrong) – the academics, the politicians, the upper classes. While they worried about socialism and Fascism, the cuckoo had laid its egg in their nest and Margaret Thatcher would hatch out of it ... Where did it come from, this new class? Some had slipped down from the middle class; most were dragging themselves up from the working class ... Most of the children I knew had no interest in where they came from, no memory of family history. We viewed each other with suspicion, kept ourselves to ourselves.<sup>28</sup>

The source of the shame, then, is a perceived complicity by birth and upbringing with Thatcher and the politics of possessive individualism that came catastrophically to dominate the 1980s. Apparently, there had been no such thing as society in the semi-detached world of the suburbs.

On this reading, that aspect of the myth of the Blitz which is often referred to as the ‘People’s War’ could even be seen as a good thing because it enabled the 1945 political settlement and held suburban individualism at bay for another thirty years. However, this would fail to explain how suburban public opinion contributed to the downfall of Thatcher in 1990 and the subsequent rejection of the Conservatives in 1997. In retrospect, Boorman’s views look like the product of 1980s despair and indeed, obviously writing after Thatcher was no longer Prime Minister, Calder eventually proceeds to take up a more optimistic note in his conclusion: ‘it now seems

as if Thatcher's appropriation of parts of the myth for party advantage in 1982 may have helped to reduce the potency of the whole paradigm' (271).<sup>29</sup> His argument is that in trying to separate the Churchillian rhetoric from the equally integral elements of people's democracy and social consensus that fed into the Welfare State, Thatcherism ending up ripping the constituent values of postwar Britishness apart and creating something of a vacuum. In the course of a decade, the historical and cultural reference points that had supplied meaning to British Life since the Second World War were dissipated. When, in this context, New Labour talked of returning to the forgotten politics of the suburbs, what they were really doing was playing on the different meanings that the suburbs convey. On the one hand, with their still recent interwar connotations of a 'restless, cultureless life', the suburbs provided a metaphor for the void which had opened up in the national consciousness. On the other hand, they also held the associations of home and car ownership, better schools and better lives, which could be held out to an electorate now bereft of alternative bearings to orientate themselves by. This ingenious would-be exercise in bootstrapping was dependent on a brave new world of consumerism in which no one ever looked back, but came undone because the past itself was rapidly becoming commodified.

As Patrick Wright presciently argued in 1985, it was precisely the sense of loss and emptiness that came to characterise British everyday life at that time that provided the conditions in which the heritage industry was able to boom by re-enacting the fullness of the past.<sup>30</sup> Hence, something like *The 1940s House* was always going to become inevitable once Britain became officially a suburban nation. However, what distinguishes the series from the heritage industry in general, is that it didn't simply re-enact a full past for millennial suburban Britain in the way that heritage properties frequently employ period-costumed performers, but, by sending an

actual family of the year 2000 'back' to re-live that past, created a dual perspective which gave the project surprising depth and meaning.

This wasn't apparent from the start. The wartime conditions were painstakingly reconstructed and the expectation was clearly that the challenge to the Hymers family was to live up to them. In fact, however, the manufactured version of the past on offer was conservative to the point of being reactionary. For example, on arrival in the house the family found that: 'there were cookery books, books with household advice, and a few volumes of patriotic history [...] some stirring stories of Empire and adventure books and some thrillers and of course books to read aloud to the boys'.<sup>31</sup> This hardly reflects the work of historians such as McKibbin, Tom Jeffries and Susan Pennybacker, who have written about how the interwar new middle class and black-coated workers of Britain were generally politically left leaning and self-consciously progressive.<sup>32</sup> As an aircraft engineer and, therefore, one of Orwell's germs of the future England, why couldn't Michael Hymers have been made a Left Book Club member or at least allocated a few Penguin Specials – which sold in their hundreds of thousands to people like him in the late 1930s – to read in his newly television free evenings?<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, the blackout and the compulsory carrying of gas masks, two of the most contentious official diktats of wartime Britain, were visually represented as conditions that the Hymers had to comply with. The Hymers are seen in the series and photographs in the book dutifully carrying their masks around with them, although they weren't allowed to actually wear the original masks due to health and safety concerns over the asbestos content in the canisters. In contrast, Gardiner's discussion of gas masks does note that as early as November 1939 many people had ceased to carry them.<sup>34</sup> To which might be added the observation that Orwell made in his

wartime diary, that it was those on the political left, unhappy with the early conduct of the war, who were the first to stop carrying the masks they knew that they would never need.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the blackout was presented in the series as an all-enveloping darkness that lasted for five years. Gardiner records that the regulations were relaxed as early as December 1939 to allow diffused street lighting.<sup>36</sup> However, this relaxation was not just an official response to the unbelievable casualty and fatality rate of that autumn, but also forced by the manifest public hostility to total blackout as reported at the time by Mass-Observation.<sup>37</sup> The idea that from 1939-1945 people all pulled together, or at least put up with restrictions in silence because there was a war on, is a classic example of the more reactionary aspects of the myth of the Blitz. In 2000, it is rather telling that the Hymers were monitored for blackout infringements by CCTV.

These elements combined in the television series to form a peculiarly passive reconstruction of the past. This was offset to some extent by the account of the women's domestic experiences after Michael Hymers returned to his job in Yorkshire for a spell in the middle of the nine week reconstruction. The struggle of Lyn Hymers and her daughter Kirstie dealing with the wartime conditions and looking after Kirstie's two sons and their sense of achievement during this period came across well on the small screen, as did the frustration at the returning husband expecting to be served with his dinner. Lyn's recognition of the moment of return to subservience was a rare textually-endorsed criticism of the wartime experience.

Another active element in the series was the family's first experience of entering their Anderson shelter at the sound of the siren. This moment is captured in Gardiner's book by a long quotation from Lyn's diary: 'The panic and the fear were there. Once we were all in the shelter safely, we sat shaking, but then these feelings

went and I was back in 2000, but for those few minutes I had been reliving history.’<sup>38</sup> This provides an indication as to the source of the passivity, for, as Gardiner writes at one point: ‘Although they were living a 1940s life in all practical essentials, Lyn and Kirstie were living it in 2000.’<sup>39</sup> From the point of view of the historian, the past is historicised; it’s past and not connected to the present, which doesn’t mean that it can’t be subject to a kind of empathic understanding, but simply that it can’t be made to function differently. It is this official viewpoint which draws out Lyn’s confession that:

This is playing at it. I have to be honest. We’ll all be alive at the end of the night and our house will be safe, as will the houses of our friends. I feel almost guilty sitting here in an Anderson shelter with no bombs. And then I thought this is why we’re going down to the shelter two, three, four times a night. We’re not doing it for us, we’re not doing it for a television crew. We’re doing it for the men and women of Britain who suffered so much during the Second World War, and whose stories we’ve heard while we’ve been doing this project.<sup>40</sup>

These heartfelt sentiments lay bare exactly what a bizarre tribute *The 1940s House* performed towards the British people of the Second World War. As many said at the time, including Orwell in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, the only way for the war to be meaningful was if it was to be fought for a future. That future had to be more than a time loop in which the sacrifices of the past would be endlessly celebrated: a process, as this article has tried to portray, of diminishing returns to the point that postwar Britain is itself now an empty space. Obviously, *The 1940s House* needed to have one face turned towards the past, but if it wanted to be more than just good television and genuinely acknowledge the inspiration of the struggle of the British people in wartime, it also needed simultaneously to face the future. This particular challenge was left to the Hymers on their own.

Indeed, it was the family's stubborn retention of their values from the year 2000 that was to underwrite all the genuine insights thrown up by the series. One such moment was when Lyn suddenly became aware that her presence in a WVS uniform while doing voluntary work at a local old people's home was distressing some of the residents by stirring up memories that they couldn't deal with: a trapdoor into the past had opened and revealed the trauma underneath. Another example was Kirstie's concern about her son's pattern of play: 'All he does now is grab a piece of wood and pretend it's a gun and stand on top of the Anderson shelter "Shooting at the Germans"'.<sup>41</sup> She was quite self-reflective enough to put this into its particular context: 'But they are in effect living a wartime experience and hearing news about the war every day, so it's bound to affect their behaviour at times.'<sup>42</sup> However, the wider contexts of the programme were Britishness and the myth of the Blitz, which every British child has had to live with for more than half a century. Undoubtedly this has affected all our behaviour at times.

It was this kind of understanding, which led to the Hymers' more oppositional moments – those that were not quite contained within the overall narrative discourse:

The Hymers came to dislike the War Cabinet; they particularly resented what they considered to be our "snooping", and often thought we were harsh in what we demanded of them. They were sometimes thrown by some new instructions or regulations just as they thought they had begun to get their world in order. But they came to accept that is how it would have been in the war.<sup>43</sup>

The Hymers' dislike of the War Cabinet – a panel, chiefly comprised of historians, who directed the Hymers' wartime lives – can be seen as an objection to history itself. It is history which bleeds the lived moments of the past from the present in order to construct its own backwards narrative, facing away from the future, and leaving only a space for the present. It is no surprise that, at the end of the nine weeks living in the

1940s House, Lyn found ‘the time travel forward to her former life painful’.<sup>44</sup> As Gardiner notes, this return left her ‘marooned in a complex space’.<sup>45</sup> To be more precise, the experience of re-enacting the wartime period revealed to the Hymers, and their audience, the deeper truth that contemporary Britishness is itself no more than a continual process of re-enactment and that once that re-enactment has ended, then there is nothing left but a lonely and alienating vacuum. The Hymers took one look about them and promptly headed straight back into the past by buying a 1949 Ford Prefect and maintaining many of their 1940s shopping and cooking habits.



*Fig. 2. The former 1940s House in 2008 (Nick Hubble).*



### 3. The Space Formerly Known as the Suburbs

The interwar suburbs never blossomed into the promised golden age; only into a time loop of postwar Britain, which has now begun to unravel. The erstwhile signifiers of utopian fulfilment have been replaced by satellite dishes and front lawns paved over to make parking spaces. The twenty-first century incarnation of the 1940s House (see fig.2) has been stripped of its sunray gates to the future and symbolises the liminal persistence of a housing form and lifestyle, which survived its infancy but never managed to reach maturity. Indeed, it is not just the interwar suburbs that have been marooned in this manner: they are merely the culturally dominant signifiers of the wider suburban development that has taken place over the last 150 years in Britain. Eighty six percent of the national population now live in this liminal space.<sup>46</sup>

How do people escape from it? They don't. They grow up and move to the City and then gradually find that they've acquired credit cards and a car and a mortgage and kids and they're shopping at Sainsbury's and Ikea and worrying about schools etc. This was the conclusion that the journalist, Miranda Sawyer, came to just before the turn of the millennium in her book, *Park and Ride: Adventures in Suburbia* (1999). Sawyer was not investigating suburbia historically and culturally, but as 'a manner of living, an attitude to life, an atmosphere'.<sup>47</sup> By her account, the spread of suburbia 'into the country, into the cities' is actually the spread of 'a particular knack, a peculiar sense of rightness and separation, convenience and cleanliness'.<sup>48</sup> In short, as befits its liminal persistence, suburban living displays all the hallmarks of teenagers pretending to be grown up and the simple truth is:

Suburbia has won. It's got its own way. It's a consumer force to be reckoned with, an electorate that swings elections, and it's taking

advantage of its power. Suburbia's desire to drive everywhere, its insistence on hygiene, time-efficiency and overall niceness has created an environment that provides just that. A hold-my-hand culture [...]<sup>49</sup>

In many ways, Sawyer seems to be upholding the truth of all the historical criticisms that have been made of the suburbs, with the simple proviso of insisting that it is a condition that can be enjoyed. Her book's conclusion invites us all to share the fun:

Because you know, what suburbia wanted, it has got. All life's experiences but in bite-size form. Time to work, time to shop, time to drive, time to play. Life compartmentalised, with no room for anything nasty to slip through the gaps in between. Drive up, enjoy, drive home again. Park and ride.<sup>50</sup>

The subversive value of this conclusion rests in its similarity to another playful invitation issued sixty years before it:

Progress and reaction have both turned out to be swindles. Seemingly there is nothing left but quietism – robbing reality of its terrors by simply submitting to it. Get inside the whale – or rather, admit that you are inside the whale (for you *are*, of course). Give yourself over to the world-process, stop fighting against it or pretending that you control it; simply accept it, endure it, record it.<sup>51</sup>

Orwell's 'Inside the Whale' (1940) remains a contentious text precisely because of the difficulty in unpacking exactly what he was advocating: the question being not so much being whether he was being ironic as whether he was being doubly ironic. By playing off Henry Miller – the subject of the essay – against the Auden group, 'he was trying to create a dialectical space in which the politics of locality, human albeit passive, could interact with a wider political imaginary.'<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Sawyer is surely thinking along the right lines: there is no longer any point in trying to control suburbia by historicising it. The sooner we accept that there is nothing outside suburbia and no interstitial hiding places within it, the sooner we can start generating a genuine

alternative ex nihilo. However, it is to be hoped that the Imperial War Museum will indefinitely prolong the exhibition of the 1940s House, so that once the new twenty-first century lifestyle has emerged there remains something to remind our descendants that our age, too, has not been altogether a bad one to live in.

---

Notes

<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* [1937], *Complete Works*, V, (ed.) Peter Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 102.

<sup>2</sup> Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* [1941] in *A Patriot After All: Complete Works*, XII, (ed.) Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 2000), 408.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Oliver, Ian Davis and Ian Bentley, *Dunroamin* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1981), 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> For an engaged account of the shortcomings of ‘tower block’ policy see Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta Books, 2007), 97-147.

<sup>6</sup> Oliver et al, 157.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>10</sup> J.M. Richards, *The Castles on the Ground: The Anatomy of Suburbia* [1946] (London: John Murray, 1973), 14.

<sup>11</sup> R.F. Delderfield, *The Avenue Goes to War* (London: Coronet Books, 1997). 440-442. This scene might be seen as a subconscious gesture towards breaking the walls between the classes; not the metaphorical walls but the material ones (built by the private developers) such as that in Cutteslowe, Oxford, which shut off the council estate from the neighbouring private suburban estate from 1934 for the next twenty five years. See Hanley, 11-13.

<sup>12</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Culture: England 1918-1951*, (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 531, 533.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London: Abacus, 1998), 212, 398.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>17</sup> The 1940s House has now become incorporated into the museum’s ‘Children’s War’ exhibition, which will run until 2012: <http://london.iwm.org.uk/server/show/conEvent.381>  
BBC London have a visual tour of the house on their website:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/image\\_galleries/1940s\\_house\\_gallery.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/image_galleries/1940s_house_gallery.shtml)

<sup>18</sup> The information in this paragraph is from Juliet Gardner, *The 1940s House* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2000), 22-24. The author of this paper grew up in a similar – although terraced rather than semi-detached – house in West Wickham.

<sup>19</sup> Oliver et al, 167.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Harrison, ‘War Books’, *Horizon*, IV, 24 (December 1941), 421.

<sup>21</sup> A more recent example of this cultural revisionism is ITV’s BAFTA award-winning drama, *Housewife*, 49 (2006), starring Victoria Wood as Mass-Observation diarist, Nella Last. Here the everyday heroism on the wartime home front revolves around a semi-detached suburban house in Barrow. Therefore, similarly to *The 1940s House*, one nation appeal is maintained by the employment of northern accents in conjunction with a universal suburbanism. For more on Mass-Observation and this dramatisation, see Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory*, second edition, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> The British ‘Blitz’ was unique because, unlike other recipients of sustained bombing campaigns, Britain was not subsequently defeated and invaded.

<sup>23</sup> Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* [1991] (London: Pimlico, 1992), 2.

<sup>24</sup> In his preface, Calder pointedly refers to the Falklands only by their Argentinean name of the Malvinas: *ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

- <sup>26</sup> Quoted, *ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 179. The author of this paper remains shameless about his suburban origins.
- <sup>28</sup> Quoted, *ibid.*, 174.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.
- <sup>30</sup> Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), 1-92.
- <sup>31</sup> Gardiner, 32-33.
- <sup>32</sup> See McKibbin, 485-486; Tom Jeffery, 'A Place in the Nation: The Lower Middle Class in England' in Rudy Koshar (ed.), *Splintered Classes: Politics and the Lower Middle Classes in Interwar Europe* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), 70-96; Susan Pennybacker, 'Changing Convictions: London County Council Blackcoated Activism between the Wars' in Koshar (ed.), *Splintered Classes*, 97-120.
- <sup>33</sup> Books were bought for the house from 'West Wickham's 'well-stocked second-hand bookshop': Gardiner, 32. The shop certainly sold both the distinctively orange-jacketed Left Book Club selections – the author of this paper bought his copies of Tom Harrison's *Savage Civilisation* (1937) and Stephen Spender's *Forward from Liberalism* (1937) there – and Penguin Specials of the period. Alas, the shop is no longer trading.
- <sup>34</sup> Gardiner, 44-48. Photographs of members of the Hymers family carrying gas masks can be found throughout the book, giving the misleading sense that they would have been carried throughout the war: 39, opposite 117, 121, opposite 127, opposite 199. However, it is clear that they didn't always carry them in practice, for example: 153, 194.
- <sup>35</sup> Orwell, 'War-time Diary' (25 June 1940), CW XII, 197.
- <sup>36</sup> Gardiner, 73-80.
- <sup>37</sup> Tom Harrison and Charles Madge (eds), *War Begins at Home* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940), 181-221.
- <sup>38</sup> Quoted, Gardiner, 100.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.
- <sup>40</sup> Quoted, *ibid.*, 236.
- <sup>41</sup> Quoted, *ibid.*, 213.
- <sup>42</sup> Quoted, *ibid.*, 214.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.
- <sup>46</sup> See Suzanne Maguire et al, 'IntraUrban Polycentric Development: Suburban Trajectories', Final Report NHD10, ODPM New Horizons Research Programme (2004), 3: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/corporate/pdf/142772.pdf>
- <sup>47</sup> Miranda Sawyer, *Park and Ride: Adventures in Suburbia* [1999] (London: Abacus, 2000), 9.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 308-309.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.
- <sup>51</sup> Orwell, 'Inside the Whale' [1940], CW XII, 111.
- <sup>52</sup> Hubble, 'Imagined and Imaginary Whales: George Orwell, Benedict Anderson and Salman Rushdie', *World Literature Written in English*, 40: 1 (2002-03), 38.