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The Restricted Reimagining of a Contemporary Suburb at the Turn of the 21st Century

Alan Marvell

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate the representation of suburbia in promotional material published by housing developers at the turn of the 21st century using a case study in the UK. The millennium offered an opportunity for housing developers to construct a narrative of 21st century suburban living by creating new developments and a new vision of suburbia. The research reviews a series of articles identifying several key changes taking place within culture and society, in particular with reference to gender and ethnicity. Using semiotic analysis, the research identifies what was presented within the developers' promotional material does not necessarily represent wider changes occurring in society. This article reveals that housing developers are practicing a restricted reimagining of the suburb often maintaining a nostalgic view of a suburban aesthetic.

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Introduction

This article reveals the selected reimagining of a contemporary suburb in the United Kingdom (UK) by identifying the persistence of a traditional set of suburban imagery produced by housing developers. The study of suburban development is based on an area in North Swindon, UK, a consortium-led planned community that was one of the largest privately funded housing developments in Europe (Boddy et al., 1997). The development includes 10,000 homes housing 24,000 people, 120 acres of employment land, open space, a district centre and three local centres. The first house was sold in 1994 and the development was in the process of completion in 2016. The initial marketing campaign for the development promised to deliver “A new lifestyle for the 21st century” (Marvell, 2004, p.55). This paper focuses on part of the last phase of the development Priory Vale, comprising of 6000 homes over 640 acres. It is concerned with the construction of suburban residential identity as represented through the developers’ promotional material, which signifies an image of contemporary suburban living. The study area is considered to be typical of suburban developments in the UK because the houses are constructed by national volume house builders using a standard housing portfolio.

Analysis of housing developers’ promotional brochures, based on a semiotic approach (Barthes, 1972), reveals that a suburban idyll is reflected in the allure of a suburban dream, set amidst a semi-rural landscape with an emphasis on home and white-British female domesticity (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; McDowell, 2007; Meah, 2014). This contrasts with a diverse range of 21st century lifestyles expressed through community, leisure, mobility, family and gender that do not necessarily conform to the traditional image of suburban living (Vaughan, et al. 2009; Huq, 2013). What is evidenced in the developers’ promotional material is an exercise in place marketing that conforms to a cultural norm and (re)presents an image of an imagined suburbia (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2010). This paper concludes that place marketing and reimagining is being restricted to conform to a set of nostalgic narratives rather than embrace a desire to create a suburban landscape that seeks to meet the aspirations of the present and provide a vision of the future.

Housing developers play a significant role in offering a vision of the contemporary suburb which can affect consumer decision making (Gillan, 2017). The developers’ promotional material includes a series of signs, symbols, imagery and text that communicates meaning and a vision of the suburban development. The selection of text and image can be considered as a political expression because they have been created for an intended purpose and are ‘endowed with meaning’ (Scarles, 2009, p.

468). Suburban developments are 'themed' through the use of symbols to create a sense of place. As such, the symbolic content contained within the developers' promotional material can be regarded as having greater importance than its material content (Allen, 2000). In this case, a house is more than bricks and mortar and through the (re)presentation of the house as 'home' it possesses greater value (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). The use of signs and symbols adds an aesthetic value to the suburb that, in turn, provides a sense of reference to our own needs and wants and frames our own expectations and aspirations of suburban living. These aspirations can be considered fantasy where signs and symbols reflect an imagined form of suburban living and do not necessarily mimic everyday life. Imagined ideas of home life and lifestyle demonstrate an expression of power by housing developers in constructing a suburban residential identity (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Expressions of power are an integral part of society and are an essential ingredient in the production of identities (Fleetwood, 2011), which are maintained through the propagation of knowledge or ideologies (Foucault, 1994). This notion of power can be referred to as an 'inscribed capacity' where housing developers highlight selective aspects of their housing development thus exercising a spatial vocabulary (Allen, 2003).

Allen argues that power enables developers to represent and construct places in a specific way and to code it with signs and symbols that 'suggests only certain groups are present' (Allen, 2003, p. 162), such as white, middle-class, heterosexual families (Silverstone, 1997).

In so doing, suburban housing developers have the 'ability to smother difference, to suggest who should be seen and heard and who should not, that can give particular social spaces the impression of sameness' (Allen, 2003, p. 162). Suburban housing developers are therefore often criticised for portraying a set of restricted identities, and for being selective and banal rather than creating and celebrating distinctiveness and diversity (De Botton, 2006a, 2006b). Housing developers present an idealised, yet sanitised version, of the suburban world, a utopian view of an immediate future. Suburban lifestyles are presented within the developer's promotional material in such a way that the reality of daily working patterns, domestic chores, childcare and issues of affordability are largely ignored and instead offer the potential house buyer an illusion of a future free of constraints. The notion of power exercised by housing developers assumes that the viewer is not complicit, yet they potentially find safety, reassurance and familiarity in those images even if they have never directly experienced it.

The fantasy of suburbia in this sense is the house buyer's fabrication as much as the developers.

The suburban home is predominantly portrayed in contemporary culture as the domain of white, heterosexual families, where the female is regarded as the homemaker (Meah 2014). This research suggests that housing developers offer limited recognition of social diversity, single parent families, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities or black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. This presents a challenge to 21st century living in the UK where diverse and complex communities are largely ignored in the contemporary representation of newly constructed suburban developments. Yet, the academic literature indicates that the suburb is increasingly multi-ethnic and progressive (Huq, 2013; Tyler, 2020) with the suburbs also being mutable spaces offering LGBT communities an alternative to urban lifestyles (Dines, 2010). It is therefore suggested that suburban developments have neglected to represent the appearance of diverse communities in providing welcoming places to live and work (Doan, 2011). Contemporary suburban developments also underrepresent young people (Freeman, 2020) disabled people (Imrie, 2000) and older people (Boyle et al., 2015) who possess a diverse set of needs and ambitions. Whilst the suburb may be able to demonstrate a potential for adaptability, hybridity and diversity, housing developers are often failing to represent this 'multiplicity of place' (Massey, 2005) within their own promotional material. This contrasts with research in North America where studies have identified the development of 'ethnoburbs', areas of ethnic concentration that display ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in which businesses, including housing developers, specifically market to non-white communities (Li, 2009).

Method

Developers' promotional material in the form of housing brochures were collected using a purposive method (Suri, 2011). Places were sought where the processes of production are most likely to occur; in this case, the collection of promotional brochures produced by housing developers located in the show homes and sales offices of North Swindon. The brochures were collected during visits to the show homes and sales offices between 2001 and 2009. The images and text convey a series of meanings that are intended to resonate with potential house purchasers yet, at the same time, they define the very product on offer: that of suburban living. Seventy-four developers' promotional brochures were collected from the sales offices and show homes of Priory Vale containing a total of 495 images, forming the corpus of the study.

The promotional material was analysed using an inductive approach; the housing brochures provided a 'semiotic resource' that is used to communicate meaning, using images (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt,

2001). A semiotic approach reveals how society actively promotes a set of values, identities and associated meanings based on a series of cultural, social and historical conventions through the production of signs and symbols of representation (Eco, 1976; Bondanella, 1977). The method used to deconstruct these images is influenced by the work of Roland Barthes (1972) and previously by de Saussure (1972), who is regarded as one of the founders of 20th century semiotic theory. Through a system of denotation and connotation Barthes demystifies the use of images where natural, unquestioned attitudes to everyday objects are revealed (Watts, 2005). Denotation is the relationship between the sign and its referent, i.e. what is present in the image and connotation occurs when denotation is interpreted through meanings and discourses that exist within contemporary culture. A potential limitation with this method is that the meanings associated with the denotative image may not be immediately understood by those who encounter it. Housing brochures may be produced with a specific audience in mind and they may be interpreted differently depending on social norms and cultural values.

Each image selected from the developers' brochures has been deconstructed in terms of identifying a set of denoted and connoted meanings by the author. The findings have been presented as a series of tables with the connoted meanings coded and from these codes overarching themes emerge and with it a discussion of discourse (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). For example, Table 1 reveals the denotative and connotative features of the front cover of a Priory Vale brochure produced by the housing consortia (see note). Further images were analysed and then summarised using an emerging set of codes using QSR NVivo, a computer software programme designed for managing and analysing qualitative data. These codes were grouped together independently of the software to form a set of superordinate codes, see Table 2. Initially the codes were generated a priori and then modified as themes emerged, revealing the extent to which the images contained within the developers' promotional material are portraying a restricted reimagining of the suburb.

Table 1, Bringing a new village to life, Priory Vale

Sign	Denotative	Connotative
White female gazing at the reader	White female gazing at the reader and smiling Lying on a white pillow Wearing a green knitted top	Seductive, inviting, dreaming Pure, clean, innocent, goodness, virginity Growth, harmony, freshness, fertility
Blue sky with fluffy clouds	Blue sky Clouds	Bright, blue, warm, limitless Soft, fluffy, light, freedom
Brown leaf	Leaf Brown	Nature, natural, rural, countryside Masculinity, stability, autumn, maturity
White boy throwing leaves into the air	White boy Wearing an orange top Throwing leaves into the air Looking up to the sky	Youth, family, adventure Joy, happiness, sunshine Play, fun, freedom, safe, enjoyment Heavenly, freedom
Orchid (part of the logo)	Green-veined Orchid <i>(Anacamptis morio)</i>	Rare/exclusive, luxury, love, beauty, strength

Table 2, Superordinate themes of suburban imagery

Superordinate themes	Image	
	Frequency	Percentage
Community	25	1.24%
Environment/landscape	399	19.73%
Family and gender	469	23.19%
Heritage	19	0.94%
Incentives and affordability	1	0.05%
Lifestyle	308	15.23%
Location and connectivity	92	4.55%
Suburban design/interior design	709	35.06%

Results

The images contained within the developers' promotional material reveal that design, family and gender, environment and lifestyle are the key features that are considered to represent the contemporary suburb. Most of the images contained within the developers' promotional materials represent suburban design and internal décor, 35.06%. Where homes are of a similar design or where there is little to differentiate between the quality of housing, promotional material will frequently focus on internal features. These images are often closely associated with lifestyle and activity revealing a range of domestic activities that take place within the home. This helps to (re)present the internal specification and décor of the house, which acts as a backdrop to the activities taking place within. The fixtures, fittings and furnishings seen in the images are typically not supplied with the house purchase but are available at an additional cost. The images could be interpreted as being misleading or a false representation or seen as an attempt to create a myth of suburban consumerism and wealth in terms of what a suburban home should and could look like.

Images of family and gender reveal those people that are perceived to be attracted to live in the suburb, 23.19%. These images may attempt to reflect the aspirations of contemporary society, but they also reflect a sense of nostalgia. Activities depict simple pleasures that are designed to invoke childhood memories such as home baking, eating together and having family fun. Suburban lifestyles

are represented within developers' promotional material through leisure activities, 15.23%. These connote active pursuits in the local area including walking and cycling and home-based leisure activities such as reading a book, socialising or eating. The images convey a sense of expectation and normality of healthy leisure in contemporary suburbia. Anti-social, unhealthy or specialist leisure pursuits are not represented. This presents a selected portrayal of leisure activity as images of people sitting around a television or playing computer games are absent.

Representations of family life can also be expressed through individuals as well as groups of people. The majority of images of people portrayed are white females, which continues to present contemporary suburbia as a white, female domestic space with an emphasis on family life: White adult females occur in 7.4% of the images in Priory Vale and are typically engaged with domestic or family tasks. This may be aspirational for some, but it suggests that the potential house purchaser aspires to create and participate in a traditional heterosexual family lifestyle. What is more striking is the lack of representation of black adult males and females who appear in less than 1% of the images with an absence of same sex couples and disabled persons.

Representations of family groups can signify a sense of community. Although community is a contested concept within academic literature (Mulligan, 2015), it is connoted within the promotional material through social interactions such as family groups in public settings in green open spaces and in private settings such as the dining room or lounge. Images of family life provide an illusion of community, albeit on the scale of the home. Specific images of public buildings used for community activities such as schools, shops, public houses and churches are included in only 1.24% of the images. Although the images of community buildings are few, the presence of community is a positive benefit to the potential purchaser as people are attracted to places that demonstrate a sense of community and belonging

(Florida, 2002). The concept of 'community' can however be regarded as an empty signifier as housing developers have little control over the social interactions that occur. As such, the housing developers' promotional material presents a sense of community requiring no active contribution from the potential resident other than to complete the purchase of a property (Rosenblatt et al., 2009).

Images of the Priory Vale landscape include frequent representations of nature and countryside, 19.73%. Images of cottage-style suburban homes are typically shown with mature trees and expanses of mown grass. This suggests that the development is an intrinsic part of nature, albeit managed, and

that the benefits of the countryside are bestowed on the suburb (Bunce, 1994). Housing developers emphasise the presence of a rural aesthetic rather than suggesting that the development is of an urban character. In contrast, increasing densities of housing have the potential to create urban rather than rural characteristics, which challenges the wider cultural expectations of suburban form (Hinchcliffe, 2005). It could be also be argued that the dichotomy between urban and rural is an outdated mode of thought, as urban areas are increasingly connected with suburban peripheries and rural hinterlands.

Brenner & Schmid (2012) suggest that there is no such thing as 'rural' only an 'extended urban', a concept based on Lefebvre's prediction of 'planetary urbanisation' (2003), yet this approach ignores the significance of the rural within the suburb. The inclusion of suburban 'cottages', landscaping and place naming can be regarded as a pastiche, an imagined geography of a rural idyll that potentially existed before the construction of the suburb (De Botton, 2006b).

Whilst the suburban landscape may be depicted in the developers' promotional material as predominantly rural, it is far from being isolated. Although location and connectivity are only depicted in 4.55% of the images, they do signify a suburban landscape that is part of a wider network. Images of suburban houses denote roads, pavements and garages and in some cases cars, bicycles and a motorbike can be seen. The connotation is a development that is accessible, easily navigable, car-friendly with pedestrian-friendly spaces. Tarmac paths provide a sense of easy access, walks, fresh air, healthy lifestyles and cycle ways. Some houses display a double garage, signifying personal wealth and ownership of more than one car. However, no buses or images of public transport are shown in any of the promotional material which suggests that the developers' promotional material is emphasising a discourse of affluence and personal consumption.

The use of historic narratives is present in the architectural design of the houses. Traditional housing design signifies a bygone age as the influence of mock Tudor, Neo-Georgian and mock country-cottage designs have been used to suggest that the development is rooted in the past (De Botton, 2006a).

However, there are very few images of historic scenes in the

developers' promotional material, less than 1%, which suggests that housing developers are situating the contemporary suburb in the present.

Analysis

The developers' promotional material has a vital role in communicating a sense of what it is potentially like to live in the new suburban development. This is important in terms of meeting the personal needs and aspirations of potential house purchasers. The developers' promotional material is used to reveal the suburban design in terms of the quality of construction, the benefits of living there and the attention to detail in housing design providing an immediate visual representation. Images reveal a sense of suburban home-life including domestic scenes and families at rest and play (Dickinson, 2015).

A place of residence is a source of distinction, like other forms of cultural consumption (Bourdieu, 1984). It is therefore important that the suburban 'brand identity' is clearly defined yet broad enough to appeal to a wide number of potential purchasers. Although the construction of suburban residential identities in the developers' promotional literature is powerful and presents a view that is consistent with suburban developments over several decades, a suburban lifestyle also permits the role of agency in enabling potential purchasers to express their own identity within the collective vision of the contemporary suburb. This is in part driven by a need for self-definition and expression through consumption and is evidenced in the promotional material by presenting a selection of colour schemes, fixtures and fittings. Yet some commentators see this as not an expression of self but as an expression of class: deciding where to live is a lifestyle choice that is connected to displays of social cultural values and associated wealth (Jensen, 2007).

Although housing developers may decide which identities they wish to emphasise within their promotional material, the identities presented are constrained by agreements with the housing consortia and the local government authority. Suburban design is influenced by the design code that is administered by the local government authority who preside over the physical appearance of the development. The use of a design code helps to create a powerful visual identity aligning housing density and physical appearance within a set of agreed parameters which influence the characteristics of the development throughout the construction phase. However, house builders may also wish to differentiate themselves in the marketplace and as such selectively highlight specific aspects of the design code within their promotional material.

There is an enormous challenge in offering a housing solution to meet the needs of contemporary and future society. Sustainable solutions are important not just to meet the demands of today, but also those of tomorrow in providing a resilient suburb that offers a degree of flexibility and adaptability.

Increasing awareness of sustainable solutions may result in living spaces being more flexible, both to adapt to changing family situations and to provide spaces for employment or other activities. Changing patterns of work may lead to more people working from home therefore blurring the physical distinction of suburbia between home and work and challenging the concept that the suburb as a purely residential space.

The difficulty with a newly-emerging suburb is that local communities may not yet exist because potential residents may still be in the process of purchase and houses may be largely unoccupied. This provides a challenge to the developer who may be unable to capitalise on the idea of community in the early phases of development and instead represents 'community' through the symbolism of the family. This is an important aspect of the suburban myth as the suburb is (re)presented as a place for family life centred on the home.

The intangible portrayal of family life through the developers' promotional material communicates a range of messages that can be considered both aspirational and, for many, may be unachievable. Notions of the perfect family living in the perfect home is part of a wider set of imagined geographies concerning the implied status of men and women in society, the role of work and the projection of self-identity through lifestyle and displays of capital wealth and consumption.

Although the developers' promotional material projects the myth of suburbia through the presence of signs within the images, it is also important to acknowledge what is potentially absent. To create a list of absences and their potential significance would be a lengthy process; yet some features are conspicuous by their absence: These include images of ethnic groups, LGBT communities, young children, disabled people, single parents, older people, multi-generational groups, internal images of a home office and the rituals of domestic labour.

Conclusion

This paper reveals the construction of suburban residential identity in developers' promotional material and offers a challenge to its representation. The research reveals that a restricted reimagining is taking place that does not fully reflect the diversity of lifestyles in the early 21st century. The majority of images in the developers' promotional material is of housing styles and internal décor that can be considered to be aspirational and a feature of conspicuous consumption. The images depict houses and apartment buildings set amongst mature trees, manicured lawns and blue skies. The use of rural imagery is powerful in offering a dream of a rural idyll with the benefits of urban living.

Yet beyond this there is little evidence of a progressive suburb, one that articulates multiplicity and diversity. Authors such as Vaughan, et al. (2009), Huq (2013) and De Vidovich (2019) demonstrate that suburban diversity does exist. Yet, what is mainly presented are white heteronormative representations of suburban spaces based on notions of family and home life. The original concept for the area providing, “A new lifestyle for the 21st century” (Marvell, 2004, p.55), does not appear to match the narrative contained within the images. Traditional notions of family life may be aspirational for some but there is potential in constructing a new set of suburban residential identities that are more inclusive of 21st century living. It is possible that contemporary lifestyles, diversity and ethnicity are not representative of the target market or that they are not appealing to potential house purchasers. Other countries may be more successful in demonstrating diversity within suburbia offering a potential for further research. There also is an increasing need for sustainable homes and low carbon environments (Williams et al., 2012) that may feature more prominently in future representations of the suburb. The suburb is slowly evolving and as such should reflect contemporary living. What is required is a reimagining of suburbia in which a diversity of lifestyles and future aspirations are reflected in the developers’ promotional material. In turn this may redefine our perception and understanding of the suburb.

Note

The housing development company declined permission for any images of their promotional material to be included in the paper.

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