

# Domestic Utopias |The 18<sup>th</sup> Century English Anglican Evangelical Movement and the Birth of the Suburb

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## Abstract

This paper presents the cultural and religious contexts of early English suburbs. In particular, it discusses the first suburbs built by the new middle class outside of London, where 18<sup>th</sup> century notions regarding healthy, pastoral living, the primacy of the family, and the house as symbolizing one's social and economic status coalesced. The early and important London suburb of Clapham Common, founded by Anglican Evangelicals, serves as the paper's case study and illustrates the religious and quasi-utopian ideals of the early British suburbs. The conclusion argues that cultural and religious ideals are deeply embedded in Anglo-American culture in an often-unrecognized manner that continues to prejudice attitudes about ideal domesticity.

Arguably the first domestic suburbs were built outside of London in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the outcome of the growing means and influence of the new bourgeois middle class. Country estates had traditionally been the privilege of the aristocracy. However, with the rise of a new mercantile middle class for the first time there was a wealthy class who had achieved positions of power through their own entrepreneurship and hard work. No longer was the ability to buy property and build one's own house limited to the "landed gentry," but increasingly was open to the emerging middle class. During a time when John Locke's theories regarding self-determination, and the virtues of the politically free individual able to own land and live where he pleased enjoyed renewed popularity, the new middle class exercised their ability to build homes that responded to their needs and reflected their new status. The notion of the "self made man" resulted in a building type to serve it – the suburban single-family house.<sup>1</sup>

The formative goals of the early suburbs were places for retirement, contemplation, connection, and self-improvement, and subsequently, as advanced by the English middle class, as the setting for lives centered on the family with the capacity for not only self-development but for the improvement of society. However, it was the Anglican Evangelical Movement, and their moralizing, prescriptive belief systems and definitions of home, that perhaps had more significant influence.<sup>2</sup> Central to the Evangelical Movement's proclamations was the positioning of the city as a corrupting influence and insistence that the nuclear family was the most important social unit, to the diminishment of other social connections. Women were elevated to head of the Christian house and appointed the leaders of religious life while simultaneously separated from the opportunities of power and social discourse offered by the city.

Cities may have been characterized as degenerate but the new suburbs were promoted as settings where women and their children could live a so-called Christian (and morally superior) life. Of course, the men still had to work in the city, hard work was still a virtue, but family and work now became geographically, socially, and spiritually separated. According to Robert Fishman, the early English suburbs constituted a "radical re-thinking of the relation between the residence and the city,"<sup>3</sup> one in which "exclusion" was its central position – separation from work, commerce, entertainment, lower classes, and other intrinsic elements of the city. The men, of course, still had access to the diversity offered by the city, including the temptations of their morally compromising elements, but presumably were more able to resist them. Their faith, we can presume, fortified them, but so did the refuge of their religiously consecrated homes. Making use of improved roads and carriages,<sup>4</sup> they commuted to the city but returned to the sanctuary (in all its meanings) of their ideal "compact bourgeois villas" when their work was done.

The new suburban house of 18<sup>th</sup> century England not only satisfied the religious ideals and changed social and family needs of the new middle class, but through its setting and style it also appropriated and expressed images of power of the county estates of the aristocracy. In other words, the houses they built not only represented the political and monetary gains achieved by this new class, it also symbolized their moral and religious superiority. All of which depended, at least in part, on Enlightenment notions regarding the autonomy of the self, and bourgeois beliefs in the virtues of the self-made man. According to John Archer, “the dwelling had become a crucial apparatus for the material implementation of Enlightenment notions of privacy and autonomous personhood, and for their naturalization into a belief system that persists as ‘normal’ to the present day.”<sup>5</sup>

Clapham Commons, a London suburb adopted by the so-called Clapham Sect, is an early example, and one that epitomized the virtues of untainted family life achieved by the relatively separate location of this farming village set in natural surroundings. Here, houses were grouped around a commons, representing the safe family and child-centered environment Evangelicals desired, and where notions of the picturesque found particular expression. But Clapham Commons also established two elements that feature prominently in suburbia to follow: a deliberate goal of living with socially and religiously compatible neighbors, and the reconciliation of the private realm of the house and the public through built form. These ideals were to have particular influence on the Anglo-American suburbs that followed, which were potentially the most significant social and environmental experiment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Sources

John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia, From the English Villa to American Dream House, 1690- 2000*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias, The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1987.

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Malcolm Kelsall, *The Great Good Place: The Country House and English Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993

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<sup>1</sup> According to John Archer, “Locke in effect set a challenge: once he articulated the notion of a politically free self who was able to appropriate property for private purposes, there lay an opportunity in architecturally elaborating that property, especially what was regarded as one’s most private property, the home, to articulate a person’s individuality and selfhood.” John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia, From the English Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p. xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias, The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Fishman p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Early suburbs such as Twickenham and Richmond benefitted from proximity to London and regular and efficient transportation.

<sup>5</sup> Archer, p. 170.