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**Society: Opinion: No joke - suburbia is ripe for renaissance**

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They were immortalised by John Betjeman in his Ode to Middlesex, demonised by the Pet Shop Boys as something approaching hell, and have inspired - or been parodied by - countless sitcoms. Since the 1980s, few writers and lyricists have had kind words for suburbia, describing it with clichés such as "drab" and "anonymous".

In truth, the suburbs of England have rarely entered the political consciousness because the urban debate has focused either on the undoubted success of reborn city centres, or on the perceived problems of inner cities nearby.

Three years ago, a group called In Suburbia, comprising local councils, other agencies and the Civic Trust, warned that a new vision was needed for this forgotten corner of England which is inhabited by up to 80% of the country's population. Little subsequently happened.

Dismissing cosy assumptions about the stability and untroubled lifestyles of suburbanites, others floated the idea of a suburban revival fund, financed by the national lottery to breathe new life into a part of England that has often defied a description. A 1999 report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation made a brave stab at it as "traditionally associated with medium to low-density residential areas with homes and gardens of similar size adjacent to the city . . . the (Latin) origin implies its subordinate position to a town".

Later this week, **Barnet council**, north London, will take the lead in trying to refocus the urban agenda towards suburbs in a major conference, supported by other authorities and agencies. Backed up by two weighty reports, delegates will hear that, increasingly, wealthier residents are moving away from suburbs to disconnected towns and villages, dependent on the car.

Barnet's chief executive, Leo Boland, believes that suburban England offers more development land than is generally recognised. In his borough alone, they are planning 10,000 new homes over the next 10 years, "and none of them on the green belt".

This raises the question of whether the government, in its desire to increase house building with 200,000 new homes a year has factored into its plans the potential for suburban England to accommodate more homes with higher housing densities.

Boland says the archetypal suburban semi, with front and back garden, far from being threatened, should be considered an asset. Most people in cities, after all, aspire to a patch of greenery. But the problem is, they often believe that they can only fulfil their dream by moving to the countryside.

Boland says 1960s' and 70s' estates, unpopular and poorly designed, offer the greatest opportunity for redevelopment. Barnet's plan, in common with other authorities, is to demolish and rebuild with a mix of tenures, from full home ownership to renting.

The broader question is how to fund a suburban renaissance. Significantly, the organisers of this week's conference will shortly launch the "Barnet bond". This is a borrowing mechanism that will allow it, hopefully, to raise money for new infrastructure on the back of future developments, under the government's new prudential borrowing regime. Talks with the Treasury have been positive so far. As Boland says, councils are a very safe lending bet.

Economist and urban specialist Nicholas Falk, whose practice has examined more than 50 suburbs, believes some new building is needed to provide a "missing link" in housing supply so that people without children can downsize. Crucially, he thinks the government is missing a trick by over-concentrating on new developments, often on greenfields rather than pursuing redevelopment in suburban locations.

Let's hope, after this week's conference, someone at the top finally takes notice. Peter Hetherington

writes on communities and regeneration.

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