

From leafy backwaters to city pressure cookers: the suburbs are no longer so twee and naff

Suburbia has changed, almost without us noticing. Four out of five of us live in the suburbs now by some estimates, and they house the full variety and dynamism of modern British life. Yet their image remains stuck firmly somewhere in the middle of the last century, as the backdrop to banal TV comedies about bickering neighbours in streets of identical pebble-dash houses.

According to Dr Rupa Huq, the most common association with the word suburbia is of a place that is “twee”, “naff”, and “dowdy,” where not much happens, and when it does the only people to see it are elderly white folk peeking out from behind net curtains.

Dr Huq, who grew up in suburban Ealing in west London, is keen to paint a more vibrant picture of a more complex place. She has written *On the Edge: The Contested Cultures of English Suburbia* to show a place full of diversity and conflict, enough to set the sociological heartbeat thumping.

“The book is about the suburbs, because I think that among policymakers in government, and among sociologists, the suburbs are not taken seriously,” says Dr Huq, a lecturer in sociology at Kingston

University, who has also served as a Deputy Mayoress of Ealing.

“I think often policymakers and sociologists tend to look at everything through problem-solving lenses. So you hear of urban malaise and that kind of thing, but the suburbs are just seen as ‘there’, and they’re left to get on with it and they’re not seen as a problem.

“The book’s got different chapters on different aspects of suburbia and I think they all add up to the conclusion that the diversity of social practices and different people in contemporary suburbs make them much more interesting than one would have thought.”

Her book, published in January by Lawrence & Wishart, features eight chapters on various aspects of suburbia.

“There’s a chapter on extremism, and that includes BNP activity,” she says. “Dagenham has the huge Becontree Estate, one of those ‘homes fit for heroes’ post-First World War council estates where everyone has a little house with a home and a garden. It’s a model estate, but it had an unusually high BNP vote in the 2005 general election and the 2006 local elections. The BNP

A new book by Rupa Huq looks at the changing nature of English suburbia. She draws upon her experience of growing up in Ealing, where she served as Deputy Mayoress. Network takes a closer look...

became the official opposition, with 13 or 14 councillors, second to Labour in what is the next door borough to the Olympics.”

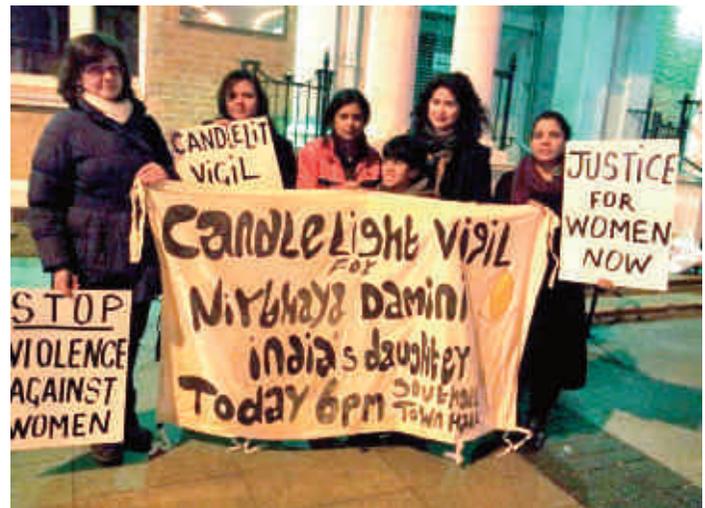
New groups such as Ghanaians had moved in, she said, attracted by the relatively inexpensive housing, by London standards, and easy tube access, and there was a “perception that there’s not enough resource to go around, which is when the BNP thrive.” This had led to tension between ethnic groups.

Extremism also included Islamic fundamentalism, Dr Huq said. Her book includes an anonymous interview with a former member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, who grew up in Kingston-upon-Thames, a classically suburban south London area. The organisation campaigns for the restoration of an Islamic caliphate, but opposes violence against civilians.

“Hizb ut-Tahrir has members with student cards in institutions who spot people and recruit them. He was at Kingston College doing his A levels and someone signed him up, and then he went to SOAS for his degree. He was the head of recruitment at SOAS for them.” Then he became the head of recruitment at the University of London. “Hizb ut-Tahrir had different sections of London: north, east, south, west, all the compass points. They also had different sections over the country, and they would mainly recruit students, who were impressive. But then one day he saw the light and just thought it was all bunkum.”

The reality of a male recruiter for radical Islam growing up in a leafy cul-de-sac is an interesting contrast with one of the most common images of suburbia: that of a place full of mothers with push-chairs.

“Usually, if you think about popular cultural portrayals, it’s the wife who’s in the suburbs with the kids,” says Dr Huq. “It’s the city where the man does the cut and thrust of breadwinning, and the suburbs are a place for woman and children. Betty Draper in *Mad Men*, for example, who has this



Photos:

Left - Tristram Hunt MP and Dr Huq at the book launch at the House of Commons

Above - Dr Huq (in red) taking part in a protest in London against violence towards women

suburban neurosis.

“But nowadays, even to buy modest property in suburbia, you would need two incomes. We’ve had the advent of the dual-income household, so I think Betty probably couldn’t afford to go neurotic on her own any more because she would also be working all the hours god sent.

“The average age in this country of a first-time buyer with no parental help is 37. If you think about a 25-year mortgage, the standard one, and retiring at 65, that’s not a lot of time left if you start adding these things up. So, I think the suburbs have become so expensive they have gone from paradise to pressure cooker in some respects.

“I think things like childcare are hideously expensive. Transport is expensive too – radial transport routes would be more useful for women who have to drop off the kids first and then go to work. Women rely on public transport a lot and women need to feel safe on public transport. So, there are a whole load of issues that are linked to it.”

These are issues that Dr Huq, as a mother and worker, has experienced first hand.

“I grew up in Ealing, went to Cambridge University, and then I worked for eight years at the University of Manchester, where I lived in the inner city. Then, when I became a parent, I went back to live not very far from where I grew up.

“I think maybe my own personal trajectory is reflecting the suburbanising tendency. If you look at the figures, most of us do something like this.

“When I went and did my degree and people would ask ‘where are you from?’, and I would always try and euphemise it and make it sound more interesting, as a

disavowal of suburbia. But with this book I wanted to put suburbia on the map and say, ‘I’m proudly suburban now and it’s not all boring’.

“The research in the book is primarily on London and Manchester. I did a focus group in Chorlton-cum-Hardy in Manchester – people live there because they have many alternative arts festivals, vegetarian cafes, a gay scene and a bar scene. I think that’s an interesting example of a suburb that is against the grain of what we normally think they are.

“The thing about the suburbs is you can almost see the city but you can’t quite touch it: you are of the city, but not of its core. I think that’s why these areas are overlooked. They are an important part of the city, and I think they are the drivers of the cities as well, financially and in terms of labour force and all those things. But they’re just seen as a bit naff, a bit out of the way, a bit twee, those kinds of things.”

One book chapter is on politics, with some interviews with MPs. Dr Huq is well placed to know about this area: she was appointed Deputy Mayoress of Ealing for 2010-2011, and stood as a Labour candidate for North West England for the European Parliament in 2004, and in the general election in 2005 for Chesham and Amersham, constituencies which have suburban areas. One chapter tackles alternative politics, including squatting, and the resistance campaigns against the cuts.

“Whoever wins or loses the next election, that will happen in the suburbs. So they need to be taken seriously and they’re more interesting than we ever thought they were.”

The book has had a positive reception: the Labour MP Jon Cruddas called it “a

fascinating exploration of the complexity and diversity of contemporary suburban life. In challenging our view of the suburbs this book challenges our view of Britain – and in so doing disrupts mainstream political orthodoxy.”

Tristram Hunt, the historian and Labour MP, called it: “a compelling account of Britain’s unspoken love affair with the suburbs”.

• Dr Huq’s first book, *Beyond Subculture: pop, youth and identity in a postcolonial world* (2005), was shortlisted for the BSA’s Philip Abrams Memorial Prize.

