


DEBORAH SUGG RYAN. *Ideal Homes, 1918-39: Domestic Design and Suburban Modernism*. Studies in Design and Material Culture. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. Pp. 360. \$19.95 (paper).

Our current COVID-19 times have suddenly thrust the suburban home back into sharp focus. Whilst many urbanites have been spending lockdown in comparatively small flats with little or no outdoor space, the suburban homes of cities, such as London, with their spacious gardens soon became seen by many as a luxury. Nevertheless, the suburban home in Great Britain hasn't always been viewed in terms of luxury or envy. Indeed, the term 'suburban' is still, more often than not, used as an insult, as Deborah Sugg Ryan highlights throughout *Ideal Homes, 1918–39*. Yet, though people have always loved suburban life, their experiences are rarely discussed or analysed in detail. In *Ideal Homes, 1918–39*, Sugg Ryan  the tables and explores how those moving into their newly built suburban home felt and understood their new interior space.

First published in 2018, this second edition of *Ideal Homes, 1918–39* provides an introduction in which the reader is presented with a brief—but useful—overview of “how to do” interwar house histories. This addition is in response to the BBC series “A House Through Time” in which Sugg Ryan appears as a historical consultant. As with the TV series, this book focusses on the stories and experiences of the families who occupied these houses. As such, we not only receive an introduction to the four families who will accompany us throughout the six chapters of this book, but the reader is also provided with a range of source material that provides an excellent starting point for those keen to embark on their own house history journey.

Sugg Ryan is principally concerned with examining domestic design and “Suburban Modernism,” as the subtitle of this book reveals. Informed by a design history approach, the

book covers themes such as class, taste, gender, efficiency and different forms of Modernisms. The breadth and variety of material used to cover these themes is one of the book's strengths. Indeed, throughout the book Sugg Ryan offers a wide range of source materials, such as advertisements, catalogues, *Daily Mail's Ideal Home* exhibitions, women's magazines, and experiences written down by Mass Observation respondents. This variety of sources, combined with a wealth of visual material, makes the book a welcome contribution to the scholarship acknowledging the role of consumption and mediation in the production of the domestic interior.

The opening chapter highlights the biographical approach that will be taken throughout the book, setting the scene for the various topics which will be discussed throughout. It is the second chapter, though, that brings us to the heart of Sugg Ryan's analysis. Through the story of Ronald Kingham (a linoleum layer), his wife Miriam and their purchase of 23 Bromley Road, Edmonton, Middlesex, the reader is introduced to the complex interplay of contemporary ideas around class, gender, and social mobility. Building on the work of Alison Light, Sugg Ryan's analysis shows how "new owner-occupiers, like the Kinghams, contributed to a transition in English culture and national life between the wars" (33).

Chapter 3 provides an in-depth examination of Modernism in relation to the suburban interwar home. Delving into concepts such as good and bad design, Sugg Ryan highlights the complexity inherent in the many stylistic terms used to analyse and describe the period. Preferring the use of "modernistic" instead of Art Deco, Sugg Ryan argues for multiple modernisms, highlighting the fluidity of the boundaries between Modernistic and Modernist. Indeed, whilst many critics and architects rejected the interwar suburban homes and their décor as "bad design," the modernistic remained popular and hugely appealing to those consumers such as the Kinghams.


The concept of “Suburban Modernism,” as argued in this book, became a middle ground in which tradition and newness could be negotiated as “mediated by magazines, suppliers, retailers and builders” (92). The mediated interiors of the suburban home, as they appeared in women’s magazines and exhibitions, showed a modern femininity that provided an atmosphere of luxury and glamour, as exemplified through the decoration and furnishings of suburban bedrooms and bathrooms.

Such feminine forms of Modernism are further developed in chapter 4, through the concept of efficiency in relation to the suburban kitchen. As the central hub of the suburban housewife’s activities, the kitchen soon became a microcosm for the development of ideas surrounding household management and labour-saving devices. Interestingly, Sugg Ryan exemplifies this development through the work of women such as Constance Peel and Nancie Clifton Reynolds, and reforming organisations such as the Committee of Scientific Management in the Home, the Electrical Association for Women, and the Women’s Gas Council, therefore highlighting the importance of acknowledging the involvement of women in the modernisation of the home.

Chapter 5 returns to the exploration of Modernism through binary oppositions, as explored in chapter three. Here the theme of reflexive nostalgia is examined through the “Tudorbethan semi.” Criticised by contemporary critics as inauthentic, the Old English past evoked by such a style was highly much sought after by the consumer. However, it is Sugg Ryan’s analysis of the Tudorbethan semi in relation with the “detritus of Empire” that gives this chapter its particular strength. Through possessions such as brass ornaments, ebony elephants and ships (either depicted on various objects or displayed as a miniature ornament), suburban home owners, such as the Kinghams, were able to “look outwards to the wider shores of the Empire” (168), whilst simultaneously assuaging anxieties of a declining Empire. Indeed, Sugg Ryan asserts that the idea of home played a key role in the construction

of a distinctly British national and imperial identity, often overlooked by architectural and design historians. This chapter certainly offers a good starting point for more detailed studies in relation to the home and Empire.

Throughout *Ideal Homes, 1918–1930*, Sugg Ryan brings together a wealth of information and ideas showing a deep knowledge of domestic design during the interwar period. Through the experiences of individual homeowners, as well as in the attention paid to specific design objects, we get a close reading of how “Suburban Modernism” was mediated and consumed. Sugg Ryan invites the reader to see the suburban home and its objects as an inherent part of British modernism between the World Wars, offering a core reference point for further research into the domestic interiors of interwar Britain.

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