

Inside

Hannah Quinlan & Rosie Hastings

Text by Huw Lemmey

A few years ago an image of a housing development in Mudurnu, a small Turkish town a few hours outside of Istanbul, went viral. The development was, in concept, unremarkable: hundreds of identikit, newbuild, medium-sized family homes nestled on former agricultural land. It was called Burj Al Babas, and the attempt to take advantage of a rising middle class from the Middle East by creating an idyllic little suburb was abandoned half-way through due to an economic crisis, not unlike similar projects across Europe that collapsed in the wake of the 2008 housing crisis. The reason this half-built little slice of suburbia became notorious, however, was not for the eerie atmosphere that soaks through these skeletons of capital, but for purely aesthetic reasons. Like most McMansions, the villas that were densely packed into this small valley were identical, but their architecture wasn't the American Federal style that normally dominates such planned communities. Instead, each of these family homes was a tiny replica of a French chateau, complete with Parisian dormer windows, and round towers with heavily balustraded balconies and turret roofs. Commentators described it as being a "Disneyland town", echoing the 1950s fairytale castle of the theme park - a sort of fantasia on European cultural values, filtered through a fine weave of kitsch and projection.

The town is absurd and distasteful, if you subscribe to things like taste - and suburbs are about nothing if not subscribing to taste. Yet Burj Al Babas is no less absurd than most other suburbia. England is awash with its own sprawling suburban fantasies, commencing in the Victorian era when a burgeoning bourgeois class, thriving off the profits of industrialisation, urbanisation and colonialism, began to leave the cities for leafier pastures in the new boroughs forming around their outskirts. For the next century, suburbs boomed, and with them suburban architectures that encapsulated the tightly wound yet feverish politics around class, gender and sex that demarcate English bourgeois life. While many European capitals reached upwards, building high-ceilinged, parquet-floored mansion blocks and apartment buildings for their nascent bourgeoisie, the English went instead for sprawling fields of detached and semi-detached family homes, each unit encapsulating a tiny molecule that built towards Britishness. Those architectures followed the same models as the recent Turkish development. Throughout the interwar years whole towns were filled with tiny little Tudor Revival manor houses, complete with black wood and white plaster half-timbering behind which sat the master bedroom, or leaded diamond windows fitted into a modern kitchen, complete with gas range and pantry, or fake Gothic tracery that hid a garage for the latest automobile.

This style, sometimes disparagingly known as "Stockbroker's Tudor", recognised the political and cultural aspirations of the middle class: a sense of independence or autonomy, an escape from the crime and pollution of the newly industrialising cities, and a tentative claim to freedom from the state. (At least at home. It's perhaps no coincidence that this desire for self-determination emerged at the same time that the British state was centralising the colonial expansion of merchant adventurers and traders into an Empire, ending company control in places like India by bringing the operations of groups like the British East India Company under direct control of the

British imperial state. London's suburbs were stacked with the legions of civil servants who made such imperial dominance function.) Indeed, England's own golf-club libertarianism is encapsulated in its own semi-ironic motto, "An Englishman's home is his castle," or, in this case, his Tudor manor house. Inside his home, the Englishman is sovereign, and his regime of manners, customs and rights reigns, as does his right to choose who to allow to enter, and who to eject.

Property and right has always been at the centre of British law. Unlike many other European countries whose legal systems derive from civil codes, Britain's common law system evolved slowly through precedent, and its constitution through centuries of contestation and negotiation between the Crown and Parliament. Many of those contestations were focused on limiting the right of the Crown, the British state, and both rights and power were defended as a function of property ownership. While the Magna Carta served to ringfence the rights of the preposterously wealthy and powerful feudal lords through such mechanisms as habeas corpus and trial by a jury of one's peers, such provisions soaked down into many Englishmen's conception of their own rights. In one's home, property bestowed a certain type of political sovereignty, a little fiefdom for the Englishman - and we mean *man*. Indeed, property ownership was a precondition of the right to vote for English men until after the First World War, and for English women until 1928, enabling many women who owned, whose husbands owned, or who rented these suburban mini-manors to vote. (Universal suffrage for the whole of the UK wasn't achieved until 1968; the property qualification was retained in Northern Ireland for another 40 years, largely as a way to suppress the working-class Irish nationalist vote).

A decade or so after women won actual universal suffrage in the UK, poet John Betjeman attacked in verse the values built in bricks and mortar into the English suburban home that spread out from London, swallowing his beloved countryside, wishing for the "friendly bombs" to come and fall on Slough, a suburban town that makes up part of metropolitan London. In "Slough" he railed against the mix of boorish values and bourgeois gender roles, the stifling conformity of "bald young clerks" who only talk of "sports and makes of cars / In various bogus Tudor bars", while their peroxide-haired wives, stuck in their homes full of labour saving devices, while away their lives painting their nails. The poem is built on a certain type of English snobbery against a rising tide of decline, nouveau riche suburbanites, but it manages to nail the very particular gender system that dominated the suburbs, one built into the architecture. Just as each house was an Englishman's castle, each family was its own royal family, with a man holding dominion over his subjects - his wife and children. Indeed, under British law, upon marriage a woman's legal standing was dissolved into the person of her husband. She could not own property, make legal or commercial contracts in her own name, or keep her own salary, nor could she sue or be sued, a state of affairs that continued late into the Victorian era.

It was Queen Victoria herself, and her family, who provided the model for this discrete and atomised form of bourgeois family that was to become the aspiration and the norm for the British middle classes. Many earlier British monarchs, and many European monarchies, were noted not just for their licentious behaviours and indulgent sexual appetites as individual rulers, but also for their sprawling courts, full of intrigue and maintained in elaborate rituals and parties. Victoria revolutionised British royalty, turning

it into a “family monarchy”, both mimicking, and becoming a guide for, the British middle classes. Despite her role as head of the Kingdom and the Empire, her husband, Prince Albert, was the head of the family, and she deferred to him. The focus of the palace shifted from an expanded court to a small family (in comparison - she had nine children), and was marked by an emphasis on a shift towards much more conservative moral, sexual and family values. Victoria was appalled by the sexual indiscretions of her sons, which were often minor in comparison with princes of earlier times, and adopted the same repressive attitudes that marked Victorian society more generally. After seeing the French actress Sarah Bernhardt, playing the role of Cleopatra on stage in a play that ended with the Egyptian queen making love with Mark Antony, killing another character, before killing herself with the bite of a poisonous asp, one Victorian matron is said to have remarked “how unlike the homelife of our own dear Queen.” The Royal’s crypto-bourgeois family structure was reproduced in homes across the land; in their nurseries, little girls were given dolls’ houses to reproduce the same again as play, learning the normalcy of this gender-sex system, played out between their own four miniature walls.

This drive towards a rigid bourgeois family structure, combined with discrete family homes and the assumption of almost total sovereignty on the part of the husband and father as ruler, helped build a gender system of remarkable violence, inflexibility and power. Abuse within marriage was not merely tolerated, but codified: even the thickness of the rod with which men could beat their wives was regulated. One of the first laws to restrict men’s ability to beat their partners was a London by-law from 1895 which made it illegal to beat your spouse between the hours of 10pm and 7am - not out of any consideration of the victim, but because the noise of screaming women was keeping neighbours from sleeping. In the expansive suburbs with detached houses and their leafy gardens, this wasn’t a problem. Due to Britain’s common law system of legal precedent, it was not regarded as even possible for a man to rape his wife, as the marriage contract was seen as binding consent. Marital rape only became illegal in 1991.

And so these little suburban kingdoms became bastions of male power; alongside the explicit violence of legally-sanctioned sexual and physical assault, suburbia also reproduced gendered divisions of labour, and its reward. Isolated within the home, women were expected to spend huge amounts of energy on unpaid domestic labour in order to maintain the family home as a place of refuge for the man, supporting his ability to develop independently in his career knowing both his personal and intimate needs were being met in the domestic sphere. While the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 ended the centuries long tradition of coverture (the subsumption of the married woman into the legal entity of her husband) and allowed women to possess property and inherit money (thus laying the groundworks for a legal claim to women’s suffrage), the demand for unpaid domestic labour combined from women along with control over money kept many women effectively imprisoned in homes in which they acted as unpaid servants. Lack of financial autonomy was, and continues to be, an effective tool of control and abuse of women; it was only in 1975 that women were allowed to open a bank account in their own name without the permission of their father or husband.

Opposed to this bourgeois suburban structure which constrained sex and gender into its purely reproductive form (both biologically and economically) rose a spectre of an urban life that was increasingly promiscuous and out-of-control, with an urbanised

proletariat shoved into close quarters who embodied a feared incontinent sexual desire. This manifested in two preoccupations for the bourgeoisie: limiting the scourge of sex work, an early pole around which middle-class feminists rallied, and the development of a deviant homosexual subject whose proclivities could be first defined, and then monitored and criminalised.

The urban space, as opposed to the suburban, was seen as a place of dangerous potential contamination between social agents. Anxieties around the corruption of young women and their trafficking into the sex industry (not-unfounded fears, although fears tinged with a heavy helping of both moralism and racism) led to an increased pressure to reform laws around sex. The Eliza Armstrong case, the result of a collaboration between campaigning journalists, Christian reformers and child protection campaigners, caused an uproar when it became known. The newspaper the *Pall Mall Gazette* demonstrated just how easy it was to procure a child for sex by doing so, and forced the government's hand into rushing through the Criminal Law Amendment Act, increasing provisions against the trafficking of girls and raising the age of consent, amongst other measures. Included in the act, however, was an amendment known as the Labouchere Amendment that introduced a new crime of gross indecency between men, significantly increasing the state's ability to suppress homosexual behaviour. Previously, laws against sodomy were strict, but the burden of proof incredibly high, and the severity of the punishment discouraged both reporting and conviction. This new crime of "gross indecency" was both vague and broad, covering everything from masturbation and oral sex to kissing, physical contact and other intimate behaviours between men. What's more, the soliciting of these behaviours were also criminalised, meaning to proposition or even flirt with another man could see men in jail.

This reflects the Victorian preoccupation with both regulating (and desexualising) public space, and with the new phenomenon of homosexuality. The idea of the homosexual subject as a sexual identity (rather than same-sex behaviour as sins that anyone could commit) was remarkably recent and ill-defined. The emergent queer cultures that were taking root within the UK's metropolitan centres were becoming more visible, but the law lacked the tools to suppress it. What's more, an idea was developing of what homosexuals *might be*; early sexological theories stressed the idea that they were a third sex, with women's souls trapped within male bodies. These inverters (they had inverted their sex) were pitiable and their behaviour innate, and were often characterised as middle class, but the real concern was that they might end up corrupting working class men, who lacked the moral backbone to resist - perverts.

The creation of a law that encompassed all the behaviours that seemed to be in common with this new identity helped solidify that identity, and enabled it to be seen, and then suppressed, in public space. Prosecutions soared, and vice cops paid new attention to this breed of creatures who now seemed to be everywhere. The nature of the act and its repression helped push it further into the shadows, but still the shadows of public space: parks, public toilets and cinemas became the feared sites of homosexual contamination, not the private home.

When, in the mid-twentieth century, the state started to reconsider its laws around homosexual offences, it was still considered very much alongside prostitution as a social contaminant. The Wolfenden Committee, a government committee assembled to

address this problem, was convened, and focused on both homosexuals and prostitutes (the gentlemen of the committee decided to refer to them euphemistically as “Huntleys” and “Palmers”, the name of a famous biscuit brand, to avoid offending the sensibilities of the women present). The law that followed from the Wolfenden Report (a decade later) did indeed decriminalise same-sex contact, but what is interesting for our purposes is the terms on which they did so. Men could, at last, have sex with men without fear of prosecution, but only within the private home, behind locked doors. Again, we see the Englishman’s home as his castle - even a queer Englishmen - a space of autonomy and sexual freedom onto which the state could not encroach. Yet the queer Englishman’s home, like the home of Englishwomen for generations, was also a prison: their sexuality was limited to the four walls that could constrain and shape it, preventing it from contaminating wider society. Indeed, the crimes of buggery and gross indecency were not struck from the law books; they remained in place in order to prosecute men whose homosexuality spilled out into the public sphere. Prosecutions of gay men soared in the aftermath of “decriminalisation”, although, as history has shown, this attempt to suppress homosexuality by restricting it to the private home was a woeful failure. Yet they persist: the attempts to suburbanise the dissolute subject of the homosexual has become an ongoing theme of conservative movements in Europe for the past two decades with increasing success.

The suburban home, the little English castle for each little Englishman, persists as an ideal in the architecture, planning and ideology of the English middle class. Autonomy becomes a sign of prosperity, success, and yet, as we have seen, for so many of suburbia’s discontents, autonomy means isolation and atomisation, loneliness and despair. The half-timbered walls of the mock tudor manor houses cannot contain the contradictions of exploitation and control that they need to survive. As a result, suburbia becomes a fractious battleground. One wonders what the Englishman’s castles will look like as ruins.

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Inside, 2022

Solo show

**Part of the annual theme *Romanticism* at
Kunsthalle Osnabrück**

Artists: Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings

Sound: Owen Pratt

**Special thanks to: Vaso Papadopoulou,
Dominic Sylvia Lauren, Sean**

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