Field of dreams

Housing

Ipswich and Upton

Something exciting is happening in Britain's suburbs

Two miles west of the central English town of Northampton, amid the roundabouts and cul-de-sacs, Utopia is under construction. A terrace of tall Georgian-style houses looms over the surrounding landscape. Next to them sits a row of Arts and Crafts homes, each with its own majestic, pointless chimney. "Mayfair in Upton" is how Sue Cutts, a sales manager for Paul Newman New Homes, describes the miniature town that is emerging on what used to be farmland. If it is not Mayfair, Upton is certainly odd.

In time, it may come to seem as normal as the tracts of two-story, semi-detached homes that dot Britain today. Upton's site is owned by English Partnerships, an official agency that regenerates disused government land. In a country in which planning permission for large housing developments is hard to obtain, the agency wields great power. Together with the Prince's Foundation, an outfit set up by the heir to the throne, it is using Upton as a template for future suburbs. Many are already under way.

The principles behind Upton are more than a decade old—indeed, proponents argue they are hundreds of years old. Traditional architecture, densely packed houses, geometric street plans and the attempt to create communities rather than just tracts of houses are hallmarks of the American "new urbanist" movement that began in the 1980s. Poundbury, a traditionalist village in western England championed by Prince Charles, was started in 1993. To begin with, such experiments were widely mocked. Poundbury is still seen by many British architects as a backward-looking fantasy; the Architectural Association teaches it alongside Michael Jackson's Neverland ranch. The Florida town of Seaside became the setting for "The Truman Show", a film about fakery.

Everybody scoffs, that is, apart from those who matter. Home buyers like Poundbury's houses: they sell for 5-10% more than similar-sized properties nearby in Dorchester, says Fiona Elder of Elder & Froy, a local estate agent. Planners like the emphasis on communal life. Most important, the government sees in the new suburban model a way of achieving some of its own objectives. As a result, ideas that remain interesting but marginal in America have become mainstream in Britain.

What the government wants (and is prepared to enforce through planning guidelines) is for people to live close together rather than sprawl over the countryside, thus preserving both precious greenery and the ozone layer. The new suburbs certainly facilitate that. When it is finished, Upton will cram 45 properties into a hectare (18 per acre). That is about twice as many as planners would have tried to fit into the same space a decade ago, and at least three times as many as a typical American suburb.

One way developers have managed this is to cut back on parking. Ravenswood, a new suburb of Ipswich that is still being built, will have only one and a half spaces per property. That is becoming the new standard, although most home buyers in Ipswich will be given just one private parking space. And they can forget about converting front gardens into overflow parking. Many houses are set back no more than 1m (6 feet) from the street; in the Georgian-style terraces, it is possible to walk along the pavement tapping on windows, just as in London's West End.

The lack of what planners refer to as "defensible space" is not just a way of pleasing government officials. It is also a means of forcing residents to become more sociable. That is also why the new suburbs eschew cul-de-sacs in favour of interconnected streets, often laid out in a grid. In a traditional cul-de-sac, "the only people to be seen are those who live there, those who deliver the post and burglars", according to Steve Carr of English Partnerships. In a new suburb, on the other hand, people must walk past one another's homes on the way to the shops.

Lest anybody take the opportunity to misbehave—by actually tapping on windows, say, or by stealing one of the cars parked so invitingly on the street—houses allow informal surveillance. Windows are placed so that they overlook streets and courtyards. In Upton, the upper 60cm of the fence surrounding each back garden is trellised, so that residents can keep an eye on each other's cars.

In theory, though, there should be little crime in a new suburb. That is not because everybody is expected to be well-off; rather, it is thanks to social engineering.