

Industrialisation and the Idea of 'suburb': Birmingham, England, 1780-1850

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Toward the twentieth century the image of a residential suburb seems clear: a district with detached houses and neat streets in gridded blocks, with their own gardens and public greenery. (Fishman 1987) But before this 'standard type', what did the urban fringes with a residential function look like and how were they understood and represented during the age of Industrialisation (1780-1850)? (Thomis 1976) Based on Phillip Henry Witton Junior and John Edwards' *Views of the Ruins of the Principal Houses Destroyed during the Riots at Birmingham 1791*, published in 1792, this paper will analyse how the idea of 'the suburb' was represented in text and images, and argue how country houses, particularly those on the periphery of the city, might have changed their cultural and geographic meanings in the process of urban expansion and industrial development.

Birmingham, England is the case study here because it is generally agreed upon that it took less than two centuries (i.e. from the early eighteenth to the early twentieth century) for the town to develop from a provincial settlement to the country's most important manufacturing centre and 'Europe's workshop' (Skipp 1980), and then from a modern city in 1889 to a huge metropolis in 1911, finally becoming the second largest city of the country. (Cherry 1994) Compared with other industrial cities in England, like Bristol or Manchester, Birmingham's urban and industrial growth was unprecedented and therefore makes an interesting topic to explore.

Witton's and Edwards' publication is a pictorial album made to commemorate a turbulence taking place in 1791, in which many beautiful country houses of local cultural elites were destroyed. I will argue that these country house views represent the desire of living in one's own house away from the bustling town. Toward the end, I will conclude, the views of the houses on the periphery of the town represent the idea of the suburb not only because they show an ideal way of living, but also because they embody the clashes and problems about residence and housing on the suburb between different social classes.

On 14th July 1791, the second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, a commemorative banquet was held at Thomas Dadley's Hotel in the town centre of Birmingham. The attendants included the circle of the Lunar Society, a loose circle of natural scientists, social scientists, industrialists, and scholars active in the West Midlands. Many of the guests were considered 'Dissenters' (nowadays referred to as nonconformists) as they held radically different views on politics and religion from the King and the Church. Disagreement between the Dissenters and the King's advocates had already been in existence, but the banquet triggered further discontent with the Dissenters. Although the guests retired early from their dinner, a hostile crowd still gathered outside the hotel and started to break windows. After damaging the hotel, the mob proceeded to the places that had direct relation to the Dissenters, and ruined them.

For example, their fury fell on Dr Priestley's property. He was not only a member of the Lunar Society and the Royal Society, but also a sympathiser of the French Revolution and American War of Independence. He was considered the most notorious Dissenter, who "tended to unsettle every thing, and yet settle nothing" (Maddisons 1956). He was dissuaded from attending the banquet so as to not infuriate his haters, but they still targeted him and burnt his home. On the following day, the riots continued and the size of the mob increased. The local authorities tried to fight back, but it was not until the military arrived on 17th July that the rebellion finished.

During the four days of riots, more than thirty of the Dissenters' and their associates' chapels, houses, homes, and offices were destroyed (Schofield 1963).

The aftermath of the riots was more complicated than the incident itself. For individuals, Dr Priestley went into exile in Pennsylvania, the United States and never returned to England; for the country, the outbreak was a trauma and the split between the two groups was worsened (Schofield 1963). While agitation went on, there was still a relatively positive side: public attention was drawn to the environment of Birmingham and curiosity could be satisfied through visual representation.

In 1792, an album on the ravaged residences, *Views of the Ruins of the Principal Houses Destroyed during the Riots at Birmingham 1791*, was published (Witton & Edwards 1792). It is a unique dedication because, through concentrating on those "principal houses" distributed on the outskirts of Birmingham, the publication informed readers that the suburban space of the town was lived by people and developing. I will locate the residences on a map (Figure 1), analyse the text and the images in the album, and discuss how they contributed to that sense of spatiality. Besides, as the publication includes the French translation of its text, I will also discuss, towards the end of this paper, what the inclusion of the French text might mean.

Views of the Ruins contains eight plates, each showing one ruined place; to the right of each plate is for text, with English in one column and its French translation in another. Arranged following the ringleaders' route, the first plate is the New Meeting House (The album only calls it "New Meeting"). The picture shows the chapel after the attack. The façade looks like a crying face as the two round windows on the top look like a pair of eyes and the two symmetrical cracks underneath look like two lines of tears. The two doors under the cracks are completely destroyed; through them is a desolate interior. The doorway is also a mess, with broken stones. Only the side façade with four rectangular windows looks slightly better. By contrast, the neighbouring buildings do not appear damaged. The road is clear and the small house to the left, possibly belonging to non-Dissenters and protected by a wall, is intact. The road and the small house communicate with the ruin through a contradictory intactness. In this way, the picture is like a house portrait and the New Meeting is highlighted like a monument. Indeed, in the passage comprising six sentences, three sentences describe the magnificence of the building, calling it an "edifice" and "a considerable pile" and noting its "more remarkable" "plainness and simplicity." (Witton & Edwards 1792) Even in the fifth sentence concerning how the mob damaged the building, architectural value is still emphasised: "This structure, after having existed upwards of sixty years..." (Witton & Edwards 1792) Showing readers a ruin but telling them its past glory, Witton monumentalises the New Meeting.

Next, a party of the mob proceeded to Dr Priestley's house and laboratory, about one mile to the southeast of the town (Figure 1). Witton's plate two depicts the site using the same tone of portraiture and monumentality, but begins to change the landscape setting. I shall first discuss the consistency. Since Dr Priestley was the most hated Dissenter, his property was "attacked with the most savage and determined fury." (Witton & Edwards 1792) It was even said the mob wanted to take him, too (Witton & Edwards 1792). This time Witton's text concentrates on the violence:

"They began by breaking down the doors and windows; and

having entered the cellars, many of them drank...wine and ale...many battles were fought; among themselves...after the effects of the liquor had subsided, they broke into, and, in the true spirit of Goths and Vandals, they destroyed an apparatus of philosophical instruments, and a collection of scientific preparations...of such number and value...the whole building was set on fire...One man was killed...by the falling of a cornice stone". (Witton & Edwards 1792)

While the text describes the violence, the picture focuses more on topographic and architectural details. There are rendering of the mangled wall, a ruin in the centre, and three more buildings to the left. One is smaller and can only be seen partially. The other two to the further left are bigger but simplified into pure shapes, such as roofs into a triangle and a trapezium, and walls into rectangles. It is unknown which of them exactly was the laboratory, but their presence endorses the title, "Dr Priestley's House and Laboratory," by giving sight of more than one building. Thus, Witton's plate two concentrates on the architecture, monumentalises it, and makes a house portrait.

The depiction of landscape setting makes plate two different from plate one. Indeed, since Dr Priestley's place was outside the town centre of Birmingham and from then on the mob mainly operated outside the town centre, it is necessary to distinguish townscape, as in plate one, from suburban and countryside landscape, as in plates two to eight. The townscape in plate one is merely blank, for it shows an empty street. But the landscape in the following seven plates is different: the setting becomes more spacious, the fore, middle, and backgrounds are outlined, trees arranged, gardens shaped, private space enclosed, and the residences thus neatly placed. Through these changes in landscape, the artist tells readers that the riots did spread out of the town. In other words, while the townscape in plate one is present by implication, the countryside and suburban landscape in plates two to seven are present through depictions of country objects and landscaping.

Again in plate two, plenty of trees are shown growing on both sides of the buildings. The luxury of having so many trees could give an illusion that the property is some country house surrounded by a green park. Even though the tree-covered area is not large enough to form a real park, it at least shows that Dr Priestley had his own garden. While a proper country house is always seated in a 'park', a 'garden' is equally significant to a (modern) suburban house, for it means green space to be enjoyed by the owner of the house (Slater 2002). Of course, Dr Priestley's residence was not a (modern) suburban house, but due to its close distance to the town, it was not a proper country house, either. This ambiguity well illustrates the suburban situation of the residence located on the periphery of the town.

On the second day of the riots, misfortune fell on John Ryland, a regular member of Dr Priestley's circle. Plate three depicts his damaged home, known as Baskerville House. Ryland's Baskerville House is on the same site as today's Baskerville House, about just one kilometre to the north-west of the heart of Birmingham. Originally, it was John Baskerville (1706-75), an innovator of typefaces and print-making, who leased the estate and built houses and workshops on the site in the 1740s. (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online, consulted in 2011) Then Ryland moved in

and had further refurbished the house to be “more spacious and more elegant” just before the mob came. (Witton & Edwards 1792) With an ideal location, extensive greenery, and beautiful decoration, a pleasant residence is formed.

Again, Witton represents such a treasure using two approaches: a monumental and portraiture effect (all his eight plates) and the mimicry of the landscaping of a country house (plates two to eight). The first feature is seen in the ruined part, including some damaged walls and absent roofs behind the principal mansion. The second feature can again be found in its setting and landscaping.

To the right of the plate, an avenue of trees is paralleled by a curvy walk in the foreground and the two thoroughfares give different layers to the meadow. In the extreme foreground to the left, the meadow is further layered by a lower pond. A bank of the pond is densely wooded with coniferous and deciduous trees, mirroring the avenue whose trees are also densely grown and trimmed. As a result, the bank completes the whole setting by providing a green corner. This embracing view of the landscaped residence conveys the vision that, even if the town was expanding, the estate should not reveal any signs of urbanisation and should, instead, maintain an undisturbed ‘country house’ look to exemplify the value of a detached residence and the preciousness of living outside the town.

However, this vision does not begin with John Baskerville or John Ryland, but with John Taylor (1711-75). After gaining huge profits from making buttons, Taylor started to accumulating properties; he eventually owned forty-three houses, land, and farms. (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online, consulted in 2011). Besides quantity, he cared about quality, too. For his home, he chose an Elizabethan mansion inside a park at Bordesley, within a mile of the town (Figure 1), and spent a total of £10,000 to landscape the park and rebuild the house (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online, consulted in 2011).

As seen in Witton’s plate four, the Bordesley Manor is seen with a brook spanning the lower foreground, with banks covered with beautiful trees to the left. The water is so calm that it reflects the figures of the ladies gazing at the mansion. In the middle ground, the mansion is located in a large and higher area. The steepness is neutralised to the right with a dense wood. As a whole, this carefully considered residence with its wonderful landscaping and location seemed to set up a model among Taylor’s circle and he became the leader of moving out of the built-up town and into a landscaped residence (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online, consulted in 2011). In other words, in terms of resisting urbanisation and maintaining residential independence, Taylor’ manor at Bordesley was more indicative and representative than Baskerville House.

As the last picture in Witton’s album, the view of Moseley Hall is surprisingly simple and accompanied by the shortest text. As a whole, the view remains neat and comprises, from the centre to the two sides, a neat and beautiful three-story house, two symmetric walls with doors, two side or gate houses, and a long decorated wall to the left. The focus on the landscaping and the architecture, like that in Bordesley Manor, suggests Witton’s belief that Taylor’s choice house is too fine to pose for a ruin.

Nevertheless, Witton's say is not final. Since Moseley Hall was destroyed during the riots, to restore its beauty, rebuilding was necessary. John Stanbridge was commissioned to rebuild the hall and Humphrey Repton to re-landscape the garden (Innes & Behrens 1991). To re-landscape meant to re-plan and re-assess, and this time residential independence and geographic isolation became harder to achieve. In the autumn of 1791 when Repton first arrived at the estate, he wrote about the environment of the hall:

“in so populous a neighbourhood, scarce a branch can be lopped off that will not let into view some red house or scarlet tiled roof. The Town of Birmingham tho' in some parts of view may be a beautiful object, must be introduced only in part, and instead of removing that ridge of hill, and the trees to North-west, I should rather advise that a few more be placed upon the lawn, so as to hide more of the gaudy red houses.” (Repton, cited in Denials 1999)

Finally, Repton found an angle through which the town

‘looks so picturesque...so low down the hill, as to not see much of that flaming red part of the town, but merely St Philip's Church, and the neighbouring houses dimly thro' the intermediate smoke, which gives that misty tone of colour, so much the object of Landscape-painters.’ (Repton, cited in Denials 1999)

Again we see how the town grew and encroached upon its suburban areas, and how this reality is avoided in visual representations.

After Moseley Hall, I now go back to the sequence of the riots and explore Witton's plate five. This time the victim was William Hutton (1723-1815), Birmingham's first historian. He had a town house in High Street whose furniture was stolen on the night of July 15th; on the following morning, the mob moved to assault his “county house”, so described by Witton (Witton & Edwards 1792). Located in Washwood Heath, about three miles to the north-east of the town (Figure 1), the residence is encircled by a large field. This can be seen from the hedged pasture to the right of the picture. A farmhouse and an animal standing behind one of the hedges also give a rural atmosphere. To the left of the picture behind the bridge is another simple and functional building. It is likely to be a barn or warehouse which adds a naive feeling.

In contrast to the rusticity, the area in front of the house is exquisitely landscaped. The central lawn is a circle and has a marble in its centre. To the left of the lawn in the extreme foreground is another lawn in a square shape. The two lawns seem to make a geometrical pattern. At the back of the central lawn are gentle steps between two grassed slopes. The steps lead to the principal house whose gable is decorated with an urn.

The neatness discovered above appears so dominant that it overwrites the signs of destruction. The signs of destruction include the smoking windows; the only intact window still with its window panes is on the top-left corner of the façade. Another sign of damage is on the two wings of the house. The trapezoid walls and the absent roof (whose connection to the principal house can still be seen from a white trace on the left wall of the principal house) suggest the ruin of the side wings. These signs of

damage occupy limited space and the principal house and its landscaping remain the visual focus. Hence, although Witton writes: “this [the principal house], together with its offices, they [the mob] reduced to ashes, excepting what appears in the View here given” (Witton & Edwards 1792), it is the remaining parts and their magnificence that he stresses.

Around noon of that day, the mob proceeded to the house of George Humphrys, a tradesman in the Dissenters’ circle. The mansion is in Spark Brook, one mile to the east of Birmingham, where Dr Priestley’s house is also located (Figure 1). Drunk and infuriated as always, the rioters did not listen to any beseeching words and started by smashing windows. (Witton & Edwards 1792) Yet the walls of brick and stone were too strong to be penetrated, which limited the harm on the exterior. (Witton & Edwards 1792) The fact that the exterior was not badly ruined partially justifies why plate six visualises such an intact extravaganza of architecture and landscaping: if seen without the knowledge of the turbulence, the view is a perfect celebration of a country house because it shows everything a country house portrait should show: a gable with an urn, a circular lawn, a simple but elegant garden house to the right, a nervously symmetric mansion complex, and the pleasure-ground with a ha-ha and pleasure-seekers on it. In other words, plate six continues to represent the suburban residence as a country house and celebrate the merits of living outside the town.

Witton’s take of the historical event ends in an unusual way. Although the last plate, plate eight, is of Moseley Hall (which I have discussed earlier), it looks too simple and elegant to make a strong ending. The real conclusion lies in plate seven. After feeding readers’ eyes on fine houses and landscaping, a seriously damaged ruin turns up. It was the house of William Russell (1740-1818), a rich iron merchant who sponsored the vital dinner. (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online, consulted in 2011) The house was located at Showell Green, with Spark Brook to its north and Moseley to its west, and is about two miles to the southeast of the town (Figure 1). Russell was brave enough to stay by himself to fight, but then still had to escape (Witton & Edwards 1792).

The text focuses on his bravery, but the picture, as we have seen elsewhere in the album, shows something else. It shows a site of dilapidation on an unprecedented scale, mysterious as a time-worn relic hidden in an old forest. In the dilapidation, almost all the façades are gone, exposing the interiors whose floors are also missing. The large collapse in the centre is a zigzag and un.masks the trees behind. These trees, together with all the other surrounding trees, replace artificial landscaping and present a wild look that is so different from the tamed and planned suburban vision proposed previously. These trees not only belie the order and the neatness Witton always emphasises, but also overthrow it as they vigorously grow over the dying man-made house. While the massive dilapidation still echoes Witton’s way to monumentalise his subjects, the wild ‘landscaping’ created by Nature unusually replaces his signature setting. Possibly not daring enough to put the shocking scene as the coda, he appends the safer picture of Moseley Hall instead. Nevertheless, drawing Nature’s power, the artist allows the sight to become a lesson told by time as an emblem that concludes the traumatising riots.

To sum up, there are six points to be made about the pictures. First, they represent the seven residences like country houses, regardless of the fact that their location was

becoming more and more 'suburban'. Second, although the signs of ruin are shown and through them the buildings can be monumentalised, Witton tends to focus on the neatness and magnificence, rather than the dilapidation, of the architecture. Third, these 'monuments' are usually appreciated like antiquity by some spectators in the foreground. Fourth, except for plate one which is a townscape, all the other plates show landscaped residences and indicate that the scene is shifted to the suburb/countryside. Fifth, the landscaping of the residences include a more spacious setting, levelled grounds, greenery (trees or plants), and gardens (large and landscaped or small and enclosed). Sixth, the landscaped residences are made possible by the capital of those cultural elites. Many of them made money from manufacturing, such as John Taylor (button-maker), George Humphrys (businessman), and William Russell (iron merchant). While benefitting from the industry, they chose to live away from the disturbance produced by their manufactories. So, the landscaping presented in the album can be seen as made possible by the power of manufacturing.

There are three points drawn from the text. First, its primary task was to point out the location of the residences, which was on the periphery of the town. Second, the closest houses to the town are Dr Priestley's house, Ryland's Baskerville House and Taylors' residence, ranging from half to within a mile. And then the distance increases to one mile (Humphrys' house) and two miles (William Russell's house); the longest distance recorded is three miles (Hutton's country house and Taylor's Moseley Hall). The radius of about three miles was not necessarily the administrative border of Birmingham during the 1790s, but it still illustrates a residential suburb around Birmingham. Third, although the architectural details he wrote imply a country house, Witton never says the residences are exactly country houses. The only exception is in Hutton's case, in which the victim's "town house" had been mentioned first so that his next property (three miles from the town at Washwood Heath) has to be described differently, i.e. "country house." (Witton & Edwards 1792) Moreover, when illustrating Humphry's house at Spark Brook (one mile from Birmingham), Witton notes that the place was "in the vicinity of Birmingham." (Witton & Edwards 1792) Although he does not call the seven residences 'suburban houses', he might know there was something existing between the country and the town.

As a complete album, the words and the pictures together convey seven points. First, though a calamity, the event has a relatively positive side: the environment of Birmingham was noticed and had a chance to be imagined and represented. Second, seemingly arranged according to the sequence of time, the editing actually provides a journey through space: from the New Meeting in the town centre to all around the urban fringes (Figure 1). Third, the album gives an impression that Birmingham by that time was a proper town that had both a centre and a periphery. Fourth, while the town centre is more easily positioned, the periphery, as the album proposes, can be fixed upon and signified through the image of those suburban residences. Sixth, using the image of the residences as a sign to signify the suburb could help reduce the ambiguous and mingled impression of the place and propose a more agreeable and unified form for it. Seventh, although a residential suburb for the upper middle class was not available until the development in Edgbaston since the 1780s and massive suburban housing for the lower middle class was not begun until the 1870s (Cherry 1994), Witton's album already represents the suburb as a residential area.

Finally, our understanding of the album is not complete without exploring its social and class connotations. Witton's album presents elegant residences, but behind it, the housing fact of the time was that about 8,000 out of a total of about 13,000 inhabited houses in and around Birmingham were occupied by those who were too poor to pay parochial tax: there was a great difference in class (Hutton 1805). While the cultural elites and the new moneyed class in Birmingham celebrated with the dinner what was triggered by the clash of class on the other side of the English Channel, the class issue at home was a blind spot. In France, it was the theories of liberalism and a combination of peasants and professionals that powered the Revolution; it was the Royal regime and the Church who imposed excessive power and taxation over the former that was toppled (tarns Goldhammer 1989). In Birmingham, however, it was the King and Church advocates, mostly working-class, that targeted the rich professionals who embraced the liberal or even revolutionary ideas.

There are some pieces of evidence that show how the Birmingham elites rejoiced at the French Revolution. Not long after the French Revolution, Wedgwood wrote to Darwin (both are members of the Lunar society):

‘I know you will rejoice with me in the glorious revolution...The Politicians tell me that as a manufacturer I shall be ruined if France has her liberty...I [do not] see that the happiness of one nation included in the misery of its next neighbour’. (Schofield 1963)

Darwin also wrote to Watt in the winter after the revolution: “Do you not congratulate your grandchildren on the dawn of universal liberty? I feel myself becoming all French both in chemistry & politics.” (Schofield 1963) Keir (another member of the Lunar Society), moreover, on being invited as the chairman of that fatal dinner, wrote

I accepted the compliments,...never conceiving that a peaceable meeting for the purpose of rejoicing that twenty-six millions of our fellow-creatures were rescued from despotism, and made as free and happy as we Britons are, could be misinterpreted as being offensive to a government, whose greatest boast is liberty, or to any who profess the Christian religion, which orders us to love our neighbours as ourselves. (Schofield 1963)

While the Birmingham elites celebrated the ground-breaking deeds achieved partially by the French lower class, the English mob of the same class who destroyed their beautiful houses was not regarded as advanced or civilised. Witton uses “pitiable”, “in the true spirit of Goths and Vandals”, “deluded”, “callous to each feeling of humanity”, and “unprovoked and wanton fury” to describe the rioters and their doings. (Witton & Edwards 1792) One of the victims, the town's first historian, William Hutton, regarded the riots as “a disgrace to humanity, and a lasting stigma upon the place. (Hutton 1805)” Although the French Revolution and the Birmingham Riots had different backgrounds and conditions, both events reflected and were indeed sparked by class difference. The Birmingham elites seemed blind to this similar social complexity and read the French Revolution as a sign of Enlightenment but regarded the riots they experienced at home as a sign of folly. Just as the celebratory diners were in sympathy with the Revolution, the French translation on each page of Witton's album is meant to reciprocally raise sympathy among French readers, too, but before sympathy is felt, the social and class complexity behind such sympathy

should not be neglected.

This paper found how urban fringes were used for residential purposes and therefore might be read as a pioneering suburb. I also explored a suburban distribution of the houses destroyed during the 1791 riots. Witton's eight pictures not only elaborate on the architecture and landscaping of the houses, but also give an impression that Birmingham by that time was a proper town that had both a centre and a periphery, and that the periphery can be positioned and signified through the country/suburban house views. Moreover, since the dwellers were mostly the newly rich people who usually had new thoughts, the social, cultural, and political connotations behind their suburban homes are much more complex than the neat façade and beautiful gardens they had owned.

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