The Surprises of Suburbia

*I Love Suburbia*, Simon Pollock (Hutchinson Heinemann)

Scattered throughout the dirt and peeling paint of London's suburbs are thousands of wonderful buildings, be they gleaming white modernist houses, art deco factories, stunning tube stations or crazy artist's residencies. Mostly ignored or unknown, certainly ignored by most commuters and tourists, Simon Pollock set out a few years ago to set that to rights by starting an Instagram account @londonsuburbia.

He quickly learnt that what interested people and attracted followers wasn't simply the architecture, design and decor of what he had photographed, but a sense of story, a narrative gloss on his images, be that personal or about where the places are, what they are like, or why these buildings were built and how they have survived (or sometimes not).

I grew up in West London, so have always been aware of the wonderful Hoover building on the Western Avenue as it heads West, but I have never stood at the top of Hammersmith Road by Shepherd's Bush and taken in the sheer elegance of The Grampians block of flats. In a similar manner, Park Royal was a local tube station for me, but although I have passed through the platforms of the other architectural marvels here in the 'Here Come the Trains' section of this book, I haven't walked in or out.

In a similar fashion, I've never taken any notice of the cinema in Acton that was the Granada when I was growing up, except as a venue to see films. My youngest daughter is delighted to know that it now houses a climbing centre. And I didn't know about The Mosaic House in Chiswick, an artistic psychedelic fantasy that opens the book's 'Suburban Oddities' section. I shall have to make a pilgrimage next time I go to see my mother; I might even take her along.

The real stars of the show in this book, however, are all the glorious modernist houses and factories, be they gleaming white boxes or curved brick minimalist fantasies. I had no idea that the Gillette Building on the A4 had so many wonderful neighbours, nor that East Sheen's filling station was so historically important. I'm sure my friend who rented a house round the corner for a few years didn't either.

Pollock is a generous and chatty tour guide, although he avoids making comments when some might be required – is it only me that thinks Greenwich Town Hall is somewhat akin to Italian Futurist/Fascist architecture? – but he does the reader proud as he promotes 'The Joys of Life on London's Outskirts', which is his book's subtitle.

If, at times, I longed for more information, and am suspicious of the need to include locations from day trips out of the suburbs – the likes of Margate, Southend, Worthing and Brighton – Pollock can be forgiven and thanked for assembling this wonderful collection of churches, housing, stations, cafés, cinemas, factories, civic buildings and architectural oddities. Not least the Purley Way Diving Board, now separated from its Lido (and therefore any sense of purpose) and living out its retirement in an abandoned garden centre in Croydon.

If you have any love for good design, architectural quirks or hidden gems, not to mention the outer regions of our capital city, you will enjoy this book as much as I did. I might even have to take an unnecessary trip to Hatfield so I can see the model of a de Havilland plane stuck on a pole outside the Comet Hotel again, something I remember from when I was a kid.

Rupert Loydell

(All photos by Simon Pollock)

(600 words)