

*—between  
edges and  
hedges*

## Suburban Identity and Grain

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*How can residential developments complement and connect with Harrow's existing suburban fabric to create vibrant, mixed neighbourhoods?*

### Metroland as a new suburban idyll

For 100 years, the town centres of Harrow and Wealdstone have languished in the image of the 'Metroland', a term coined by the Metropolitan Railway's marketing department in 1915 when the Guide to the Extension Line became the Metroland guide. The booklet promoted the land served by the railway for the walker, visitor and the house hunter.

Over the next fifty years, this eloquent and innovative unity of town and country was portrayed through film, poetry and architecture. Charles Holden's modern tube stations, and John Betjeman's personal film and poems were set against a backdrop of new streets of 1930s housing in Arts and Crafts style.

The 'Metroland' vision, though compelling in its early clarity, became freighted with a kind of nostalgic glaze over the years. The language of its advocates shifted from the railway operators' dream of a modern home in beautiful countryside with a fast railway service to central London, to Betjeman's intimate poetry of a lost and yearned-for past:

*'Early Electric! Sit you down and see,  
Mid this fine woodwork and a smell of dinner,  
A stained-glass windmill and a pot of tea,  
And sepia views of leafy lanes in Pinner –  
Then visualize, far down the shining lines,  
Your parents' homestead set in murmuring pines.'*

Evasive, and increasingly subjective, Metroland, according to the railway guide of 1915 was always 'a country with elastic borders that each visitor can draw for himself'.

So where is it really? Author Leslie Thomas wrote of Metroland being 'in the country but not of it', and A.N. Wilson has observed that suburban developments of the early 20th century became 'not perhaps town or country'.

### Metroland as a modern model for development

This ambiguity of identity is of relevance to today's aspirations for Harrow and Wealdstone. A pressing need for good housing demands clear spatial thinking and ideas if we are to create vibrant, mixed neighbourhoods with which people can identify. To do this, we need to look closer at the distinctive characteristics of Harrow.

Harrow on the Hill existed before the advent of the railways, but two different railway lines steered its development in different directions.

The area now called Wealdstone was the site of the first station on a new north-western railway route, linking Euston to Birmingham in 1837. This ran to the north of, and bypassed, Harrow on the Hill. The station created new growth around a cluster of industrial buildings and associated workers' housing. Roads here formed a rough and generously proportioned grid. Palmerston, Canning and Peel

Road, Headstone Drive and Harrow View set the scene for housing and large industrial lots such as Kodak. This is the more 'typical' suburb, with Victorian terraces running off a busy High Street, interspersed with more expansive industrial plots, soon to be redeveloped for large scale housing.

By contrast, Harrow-on-the-Hill station marked the famous Metropolitan line extension into Metroland and catered for affluent commuters. Roads here were more akin to the earlier tracks linking farming settlements, sinuous routes circumventing the ancient hills of the landscape. Looking at advertising posters and even photographs of these roads as they are today one is struck by a quality of openness and calm. Streets are not cluttered, they are empty of people and cars. Buildings are set apart, with large trees surrounding them, and often only one house visible at a time.

Whereas suburbia suggests a less intense city, which can be overcome by adding density and exciting uses, the term 'Metroland' seems to indicate something entirely different: the idea of movement and proximity to other places, and the promise of proper land or countryside. Intensifying Metroland therefore requires something very different from a simple densification of land.



Das Grosse Muminbuch, Tove Jansson



## METRO-LAND

Metro-Land publication © Public Domain

### Capturing character to generate urban design

The primary infrastructure that best captures the character of Harrow is its green space; promising long views, offering capacity for sustainable growth, its large trees silhouetting a deep collective history. Not only does this infrastructure need to be nurtured and maintained, it is a shared project that helps maintain the pleasant and desirable deception of being in the countryside.

It also offers a powerful urban design technique that can be used to create a new type of more dense living environment. By spacing buildings and plots apart so that trees can be allowed to grow taller than the buildings, built volume may be tempered, if not concealed, with a green foreground. It should not be possible to tell where one plot ends and the next begins and there may be no clear distinction between public, private and communal spaces. Arguably, this kind of 'inhabited Arcadia', is everything the orthodoxy for 'active' streets has made us unlearn.

### The importance of green borders

These green 'elastic borders' are an important device. It becomes possible to substitute the quality of close proximity between buildings an important hallmark of urban living, and instead distort and play with distance by sustaining a green landscape between built development. The common ground is where choices can be made for interaction, and shared life resides. Vibrancy becomes possible through the diversity of people and uses set within a shared green infrastructure. Parking, amenity and play uses become equally important, as long as their shared quality is that of being part of a leafy verdant garden.

This design strategy might be compared to a zoo - different beasts are kept within entirely different conditions yet each sits within one large, overall landscape. It is possible, and desirable, to enter entirely different spaces, climates, architectures and styles in close proximity to each other, as long as the contract of the shared garden is adhered to.

### Landscape to frame different experiences

The attraction is in the variety of experiences within, and the landscape is a frame in which to hold these experiences. The Giardini public gardens in Venice offer a similar experience with their array of national pavilions used to host the art and architecture Biennales. It is possible to enter different 'countries', or sample different cultural ideas, within ten steps of each other. The diversity and richness of the mix is tempered by a landscape of large mature trees between the pavilions. The event is successful not because of the content of the exhibitions but because it is so exhilarating to move between the different experiences.

This model for a new Metroland is archaic, humane and capable of many different kinds of interpretation. It encourages innovation and generosity, and enables a range of scales to be accommodated, including very large buildings.

There is space for the imagination to expand, and for new development to be rich and diverse - an alternative vision to suburbia.



The Bridge, Wealdstone © Philipp Ebeling



Civic Centre courtyard © Philipp Ebeling



Headstone Manor © Philipp Ebeling



The Kodak factory © Philipp Ebeling