



It's hard to believe that Elm Village — which looks about as un-urban as you can get — is in deepest Camden Town

It's the same on many of the prime development sites of the 80s, little patches of suburban bliss blooming like valerian on a bomb site. My brother lived for some time in an anarchists' squat in a splendid abandoned London County Council block at Surrey Docks. The block, four floors of two-storey flats around a courtyard, solid and handsome as a fortress, matched its tough surroundings of timber yards and scrap-metal dealers, the few remaining dock buildings and the handful of surviving Georgian and Victorian houses.

Everything around the blocks was being redeveloped. The usual Thames-side 80s rules applied: the rich got a view of the river, and the poor got a view of the rich. It wasn't the council which got rid of the anarchists in the end — the letters got less and less menacing until eventually they were being addressed as "Dear Occupant" and consulted on their views about community farms — it was the day they realised that far from the cutting edge of urban hardness, they were living in the middle-class suburbia so many of them had fled in the first place.

Maev Kennedy on that little patch of Esher in the inner city: the 80s townhouse development

Town and out

Something peculiar happened to London in the late 80s: all manner of things abandoned their allotted places and turned up in the centre of town. I remember the Christmas I met a fox trotting around the edge of the funfair which had taken over Leicester Square, a creature more urbane and dapper than any of the humans in sight. Like the foxes, the suburbs must have sloped in until they arrived slap in the city centre, complete with red brick with yellow-brick twiddly bits, door chimes and enamel house-number plaques, *Clematis montana* on plastic trellis and reconstituted stone bird baths. The whole suburban DIY superstore kit and caboodle appeared overnight, in the land where the tower block should be king.

The phenomenon can be seen in fullest bloom, to almost hallucinogenic effect, at Elm Village in Camden. On this triangle of once unlovely

wasteland between St Pancras Way and the canal, not just suburbia but an entire Home Counties village sprang up, promptly winning a 1984 housing award for looking as unlike an urban development as could be conceived.

As in any Home Counties village the aimless teenagers shuffle about, stranded as beached whales among the trellis porches, the pristine brick-paved parking bays and the pompom trees. It lacks only those village essentials of pub, charity shop and undertakers. It does have a notice board: this carries pitiful pleas from those craving to move in; an ad seeking a landscape gardener "for a small Elm Village plot"; and a council warning that the dinky trees are infested with brown moth caterpillars, which can cause "severe irritation or even blindness" — which seems an unnecessarily harsh judgment on the inhabitants just because they couldn't bear to live in the city.

Ups

Intellectual snobs may mock your frilly porch and those yellow-brick eyebrows above the windows, but at least you have your **own front door and garden** for the same price they'd pay for a flat. Being new and, contrary to popular belief, **often well-built**, 80s houses are low-maintenance, and the Brookside-style closes and cul de sacs are quiet.

Downs

The **architecture is bland** and the interiors usually compact and functional. You're likely to find yourself on an estate of **identical neighbours** and feel **cut off** from the flow.

Prices

Attractive because **everyone wants period living**. Surrey Quays is the place to look. Alex Neil (0171-394 9988) has a

two-bedroom house with walled garden in Capstan Way for £125,000, a £20,000 rise on five months ago because two-bedroom houses are "gold dust". Chestertons (0171-357 7999) is asking £219,950 for a **four-bedroom house** in a development of 20, Filigree Court, Silver Walk, SE16. An 80s mews house in Maida Vale with **four bedrooms**, two bathrooms and sun lounge costs £375,000 through Goldschmidt & Howland (0171-435 4404).

Who lives there

Brookside fans and **young families**. In Surrey Quays it is a **PC mix of working classes** and **white-collar workers** who have been lured by its proximity to the office — something that's earned it the reputation as a dormitory town for the City.
Anna Tims