

International Interpretations of the Garden City Ideal: Lessons for Placemaking

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Key words: Garden City, international, place-making, architecture, planning, urban design

Ebenezer Howard set out on his peaceful path to real reform (1898) as a direct response to the worst excesses of the capitalist free-for-all that had manifested itself in nineteenth century urban England. The ensuing urban aesthetic might best be described, using the words of DH Lawrence, as ‘pseudo-cottagey’¹ but it has left its DNA on almost every suburban housing estate built in England subsequently. It became synonymous with clean, healthy and decent living and was a social experiment that quickly attracted global attention. An impressive array of international architects, planners and politicians – even Lenin is alleged to have visited Letchworth in 1907² – came to see for themselves. What they took away they adapted to their own cultures and circumstances.

This short article takes a glimpse at selected interpretations of Garden Cities overseas and argues that looking abroad can help those reinventing garden cities at Ebbsfleet, Bicester and elsewhere in Britain to adapt Howard’s vision to 21st century Britain.

Mainland Europe had seen its fair share of 19th century urban squalor. Model company towns such as Siedlung Eisenheim (Germany) and Le Creusot (France) were a fairly common response but only had a small impact on the problem. It was the publication of Georges Benoit-Levy’s *La Cité Jardin*’ in 1904 that allowed France to begin its successful large scale interpretation of Howard’s original vision after the destruction of World War 1. The strategic approach and public sector role in French Garden Cities was a key to their success. The momentum came from Henri Sellier, who established the l’École des Hautes Etudes Urbaines (EHEU)³ and who as president of the Office Public d’Habitations à Bon Marché (HBM) de la Seine⁴ in 1921 set out a plan for 15 Garden Cities around Paris – all of which were built. Sellier moved away from a repetitive landscape of low density ‘cottages’ to a mix of high density housing blocks interspersed by individual houses. At Stains, north of Paris, 1220 apartments and 456 houses were built between

¹ DH Lawrence (1919) Ugliness

² <http://eandt.theiet.org/blog/blogpost.cfm?threadid=56170&catid=364>

³ Now the Institut d’Urbanisme de Paris: <http://urbanisme.u-pec.fr/> (cp Dept of Civic Design, Liverpool University founded by Lord Leverhulme of Port Sunlight renown in 1909)

⁴ Literally ‘Public Office for Affordable Housing in the Seine Region [Greater Paris]’

1921-33, all by the public sector and all set in a deliberately landscaped environment with community services (shops, schools, health etc...) integrated into the master-plan. The architects, Gonnot and Albenque, paid particular attention to detailing the housing and the clear references to arts and crafts and 'cottage' can be identified⁵. At Suresnes, where he himself was mayor, Sellier paid similar attention to detail and over 2,500 dwellings were built around a town centre that included churches, schools, a 1200 seat theatre⁶ and shops, and which still operates as a successful Garden City today.

Sellier's Garden Cities depended on Paris to keep their inhabitants in work. As such they certainly did not conform to Howard's self-sufficiency model but, being not for profit and with strong public sector support they successfully adapted his model to fit the practicalities of the time. Their social mix, human scale, sense of community⁷ combined with attention to architectural detail and integration into a peaceful landscape aesthetic⁸ has helped them fare far better than the later 'grands ensembles.'

Elsewhere in France a similar public sector role in Lyon and Marseille saw the model applied there, as well as in Reims where the public sector housing body 'Le Foyer Rémois' (HBM) implemented a strategic scale plan drawn up by Major General George B Ford of the US Army after World War 1. It established a dozen Garden Cities separated by green belts and each containing industry and housing organised into villages around a 'Maison Commune.' Continuity of management by the Le Foyer Rémois⁹ who still run the 'villages' has allowed for organic, controlled development over time, keeping the original ideals alive.

Meanwhile in Germany, strong public sector involvement combined with an emerging strategic approach to urban planning (*Raumordnung*) drove initiatives such as the Ernst May's expansion of Frankfurt-am-Main (1926-32) by the creation of 14 new garden settlements. Such a strategic planning vision requires strong control over land rights if it is to be implemented. The Frankfurt Housing Association's had that at Romerstadt and showed how Howard's thinking could be adjusted to accommodate May's modernist vision of new materials and new technical innovations, all carefully placed into a well-crafted '*stadlandschaft*' (city-landscape). The strategic

⁵ See photograph #1: The English 'Arts and Craft' influence can be easily identified at Stains, north of Paris

⁶ See photograph #2: Suresnes Garden City included a 1200 seat community theatre

⁷ See photograph #3: Chatenay-Malabry Garden City: post office and residential accommodation

⁸ See photograph #4: Chatenay-Malabry Garden City: terraced landscape setting for apartments

⁹ <http://www.foyer-remois.fr/>

combination of new Garden Cities to the existing regional centre proved a success in Germany, whereas attempts by the geographer Walter Christaller to create a new series of stand-alone, self-sufficient Garden Cities with their own agricultural hinterland failed because they omitted to fully address community ideals and because they were founded on a flawed political ideology – Christaller worked for Himmler.

The Garden City vision was not confined to western Europe. At Zlin (now Czech Republic) Le Corbusier interpreted Howard, giving an urban design and architectural approach to the city that drew the modernist materials and the aesthetic of the central factory into the housing and community services; setting all into a generous parkscape.

Perhaps Europe's most successful interpretation of Garden City is at Tapiola near Helsinki. It also demonstrates the adaptability of the idea to modern times and the success of involving stakeholders. Here a private not-for-profit organisation (Asuntosäätiö) was set up in 1951 by six social organisations (including trade unions). It was headed by Heikki von Hertzen who set out to create an ideal Garden City to be both economically viable and beautiful. The key to success was the insistence by the planners involved that no one professional group could solve the problem and that an inter-disciplinary approach was needed. The result is a high class urban environment catering for all sectors in society based on the principle that there is an inherent aesthetic in nature and it should be put first, with architecture playing a supporting role. Tapiola is a working town, not the dormitory town so many other 'Garden Cities' have turned out to be.

Of course, it was not only in Europe that Garden Cities proved an attractive label for attempts to design a way out of the urban chaos. Colonial influences had spread the idea afar.

In Australia land was not in short supply so cities had been relatively free to expand as far as they wanted. Urban form often followed a conventional grid and urban living conditions, even in industrial areas, were somewhat better than in many UK cities. There was a tendency in some of the more expensive suburbs, eg Garden City in Melbourne, to move towards a landscaped urban milieu as a nod in the direction of trends in European planning. It is, though, in Canberra (1911) that the landscaped city showed it was capable of being built on a scale large enough to house 358,000 inhabitants. Planned by Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion, the scheme uses the natural setting to superimpose a polycentric urban diagram of radiating avenues and manicured landscapes. Of course, it took the strength of the federal state to bring all parties and the land together but the resulting built form would please those who see Garden Cities as landscaped cities, even if they owe little to Howard's original social principles.

The English colonial influence is also seen at Pinelands (Western Cape) in South Africa (1919). Designed by Albert Thompson who had worked at Letchworth it has now become a 'select' exclusive landscaped suburb with tightly controlled planning regulations to ensure its residents are left protected in their exclusivity; perhaps not something that should be aspired to.

This turn to exclusive garden suburbs is all too often prevalent in central and South America and is a lesson for those attempting to stick to the original ideal of social mixing. Unwin and Parker designed a Garden City in Sao Paulo which disappointingly is no more than a leafy suburb with protected status helping to maintain its high property values. Lomas de Chapultepec^{10 and 11} (1928) and Colonia Hipodromo de la Condesa in Mexico City are two such examples of similar gentrification. More successfully Erich Zeyen's plan for Ciudad Jardin Lomas del Palomar (1929) in Argentina included facilities such as shops and his plan centred on the human scale. What transpired has to some extent stood the test of time, and that can be put down to a social mix in population and good community involvement in decision making – both are lessons to take from this.

Staying on the American continent; the USA played a major role in experimenting with Garden City thinking. Early work in creating landscaped estates (eg Forest Hills NY) gave way to serious ideological debate with the creation of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), who made a good case for needing strategic integrated planning if Garden Cities were to be made to work. Having created the 3,500 km Appalachian Trail (1923) the RPAA expanded its ideas to include a network of regional cities set in large natural spaces and realised that if Garden Cities were to work they now needed to accommodate the car. So was born the Radburn layout, separating cars from people in a planned landscape. Stein, Wright and Sewell-Cautley designed Radburn (NJ) as an autonomous self-contained community with residents paying a local tax to manage the town (cp Letchworth). The community is thriving today and its influence such that it impacted on the successful 'Radburn' extension of Letchworth itself.

Although other examples of Garden City influenced developments can be found in the USA and particularly in the Greenbelt Towns designed to help economic recovery after the Depression (eg Greendale WI) the surplus of land in the country has tended to see suburbanisation as a solution to urban planning problems since World War 2 rather than Garden Cities.

¹⁰ See photograph #5 (courtesy of Jonathan Bassindale) Lomas de Chapultepec, Mexico City: garden suburb becomes gated community

¹¹ See photograph #6 (courtesy of Jonathan Bassindale) Lomas de Chapultepec, Mexico City: a English urban aesthetic in central America

No 'Grand Tour' of Garden Cities would be complete without a visit to Asia. Japanese officials were amongst the first to visit Letchworth. They saw Garden Cities as an approach that would allow them to stem the flow of workers from the countryside. Once back home they drew up plans to bring infrastructure to rural areas to entice the population to stay. Instead they inadvertently facilitated the creation of dormitory suburbs. At Den-en-Chou (1923) private developers took up the idea and built an impressively sized town for 29,000 people. Howard's social ideals were replaced by capitalist principles. Even with its own building code the town is finding it hard to control economic forces as landscaped elements are being replaced by solid walls demarcating ownerships.

It is, though, in Asia that today's Garden Cities are being built. Putrajaya in Malaysia, a typical example, is perhaps more a 'green city' than a 'Garden City' but the latter phrase has assumed looser connotations than Howard applied to it and has become a valuable marketing statement rather than a social experiment. China is responding to its own urban industrial problems with 'Garden Cities' such as Tianfu (Chengdu) where work began in 2011 and which is expected to house 2 million people by 2030. It is easy to be dismissive of these 'Garden Cities' but they are on publically owned land, they are surrounded by greenbelt, they do have good public transport and being mainly high density they are not as consuming of land as Howard's original.

Howard had the first but not the last word on Garden Cities. Much of what has been done abroad in the name of the Garden City movement has had some degree of success but in pretty much every case this has involved sacrificing some of the original concept. In their different ways, however, the more successful of these iterations all display a strong, well informed, integrated urban planning and design philosophy that puts place-making above profit and that adapts well to prevailing circumstances. The result has not been unpleasant and perhaps worth the sacrifice.

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