

Tomorrow 125

A Practical Path to a Hopeful Future

Interim Report
December 2021



Tomorrow 125: A Practical Path to a Hopeful Future. Interim Report

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Executive summary

2023 will see the 125th anniversary of the publication of Ebenezer Howard's *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, one of the world's most practical and powerful attempts to work out how we can live in a fairer, healthier and more sustainable way.

The Tomorrow 125 project is exploring how the Garden City idea can help us to construct a pathway to a hopeful future based on a fairer society. The TCPA has used a variety of projects, events and interventions to engage with people about the Garden City idea. In the process, the project has uncovered a rich and challenging legacy focused on progressive social transformation. This legacy stands in stark contrast to many people's perception of the Garden City, and is radically different from the way that the term tends to be used within modern development initiatives.

This Interim Report takes stock of the work undertaken so far and sets out how the project will build towards a renewed understanding of the relevance of the Garden City idea to the challenges of the 21st century. It summarises the activities carried out to date, outlines emerging themes, and sets a framework for stage 2 of the Tomorrow 125 project.

Part 1

What's this all about?

In 1898 *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*,¹ written by Ebenezer Howard, launched the influential idea of the Garden City. Howard put forward his Garden City proposal as practical way of creating living conditions in which everyone can thrive, so helping to secure the 'good life'. It was a uniquely practical vision based on sharing the wealth created by developing places. It has proved to be one of the most successful, influential and enduring examples of an alternative and sustainable way of living that the UK has ever produced. But in recent years the term 'Garden City' has been much abused and devalued. Howard's hopeful ideas are rarely holistically applied, and are often invisible to the communities that need change the most.

But if we were to address the myths and return to the radical roots of the Garden City, could we learn how to construct a fairer, healthier and more sustainable future? The TCPA's Tomorrow 125 project aims to answer this question and determine the relevance of the Garden City to the challenges of today. The Garden City idea is part of a rich cultural tradition of utopian thinking. It is not the property of the TCPA, but the Association, which was founded by Howard and his supporters in 1899, is uniquely placed to explore its modern relevance – 125 years of experience gained from agitating for change, and from the successes and setbacks of building real places, enables the TCPA to speak with some authority about the value of a hopeful future. The aim is to do so, as Howard did, with generosity and a sense of co-operation, identifying and celebrating new ideas and acknowledging the 'other England' of communities inventing solutions for themselves.

This Interim Report summarises the progress made in the Tomorrow 125 project to date in answering the question of how to construct a fairer, healthier and more sustainable future. Part 1 sets out the project approach and briefly outlines key aspects of the Garden City legacy that have been particularly important within project debates. Part 2 distils the progress made in defining the meaning of the Garden City idea. Part 3 sets out the implications of this definition of Howard's vision for the next stage of the project.

¹ E Howard: *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Swann Sonnenschein, 1898

Project approach

The Tomorrow 125 project is a two-year programme of collaborative work and events exploring the Garden City idea. It will culminate in the development of a roadmap of practical actions, to coincide with the 125th anniversary of the publication of *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (henceforth referred to as *To-morrow*) in 2023. The aim is to reignite a conversation about how to achieve socially just and sustainable places and, importantly, provide practical hope for a more humane and kinder society. The project is aligned with the TCPA's Arts Strategy² and uses a range of tools, events and interventions to engage a wide audience. It complements the TCPA's ongoing work with government at all levels, with the private sector, and with those planning for and delivering new and renewed communities through the current planning and development system.³

The project is divided into three distinct stages:

- **Stage 1:** Igniting the conversation (2021).
- **Stage 2:** Testing the ideas (2022).
- **Stage 3:** Creating the 'final statement' and promoting the ideas (2022-2023).

The work undertaken for stage 1 of the project in 2021 has included:

- Establishing a project Sounding Board.
- Publishing a new project website, at <https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/>
- Reviewing *To-morrow*, and the work of the key thinkers who shaped Howard's approach and of those who tried to implement his ideas over the last 120 years, in order to inform a Provocation Paper.⁴
- Undertaking an online survey to gather initial thoughts about the Garden City idea.
- Collaborating with new partners to understand wider conversations about place, equality, and sustainable development.⁵
- Exploring the relevance of the Garden City idea through the TCPA's practical project work in communities.
- Promoting the project at internal and external events and through informal interviews with interested organisations and individuals, to encourage engagement in the survey and provide input to the Interim Report.
- Producing a series of videos on aspects of the Garden City idea.

Tomorrow 125 project resources

Activities undertaken to date have resulted in a suite of Tomorrow 125 project resources. Two parallel areas of work have emerged: the first revisiting the roots of the Garden City idea – looking at what they mean today, links with other strains of contemporary thinking, and the relevance of the idea itself; and the second concerning current perceptions of the Garden City idea and its interface with current policy, campaigns, and practice.

This Interim Report touches on both areas but focuses on understanding the Garden City's roots and what the idea means today. Work on current perceptions of the idea is also touched on, but is explored further through analysis of the survey results and in videos and other resources available on the Tomorrow 125 project website. These resources will feed into core activities in stage 2 of the project. Feedback from the survey has been used to inform this report and will also be referred to at subsequent stages. A summary of the survey results is available on the project website,⁶ and the survey questions are reproduced in the Appendix to this report.

2 *That Word 'Art': A Strategy to Promote the TCPA's Vision of Civic Art*. TCPA, Mar. 2021.

<https://www.tcpa.org.uk/art-and-planning-strategy>

3 The TCPA's publications giving practical guidance on creating new communities that follow the Garden City Principles are available at <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/guidance-for-delivering-new-garden-cities>

4 H Ellis and K Lock: *The Garden City: Saviour or Dead End?* Background Paper. TCPA, Sept. 2021.

https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/downloads/T125_Background_Paper_V1.pdf

5 The TCPA's partnership with CENTRIS is one example of such collaboration, focused on exploring the pathway to a good society without poverty

6 See <https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/zones/school-university>

Why we need a practical path to a hopeful future

The Tomorrow 125 project began with the same assumption that Howard applied when he wrote *To-morrow* – that the way we organise society now does not support healthy and fulfilling lives for most people most of the time. Changing the way that we live could have obvious and desirable benefits. But the positive case for change runs in parallel with the grave challenges that confront our society. Some of these challenges Howard would easily have recognised: poverty and economic inequality; poor physical and mental health; poor housing conditions; an economy failing to meet the basic human needs of many; and technology making some people's occupations redundant. But our present is defined by other pressing problems – from racial inequality and the climate crisis, to a broken housing delivery model.

As a result, the question of how people can live together in peace and in harmony – both with each other and with the planet upon which they depend – is the political question of our time. Hundreds of reports have been produced by think-tanks, foundations and charities describing the problems that we face and some proposed solutions, but it is significant that, in very many cases, the identification of problems has not translated to substantial practical change on the ground.

For the TCPA, no-one has answered the question of how to construct a hopeful future as compellingly or as effectively as Howard's practical vision as set out in *To-morrow*. The question is: does anyone agree with us? And if not, is there another, better concept that we are unaware of? With crises mounting and time to address them running out, we need to test whether the detail and mechanics of these ideas still work – and, if not, identify what needs to be done to update them.



Ebenezer Howard's drawing, 'The Master Key', with a quote from James Russell Lovell's *The Present Crisis* – 'They must upward still, and onward, who would keep ahead of Truth'

The history of the Garden City idea

The Garden City story is one of radicalism, hope, and practical idealism, as set out in greater detail on the Tomorrow 125 website⁷ and in *The Art of Building a Garden City*.⁸

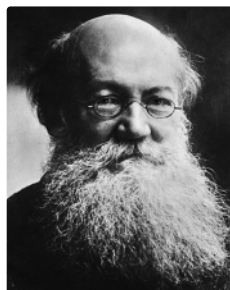
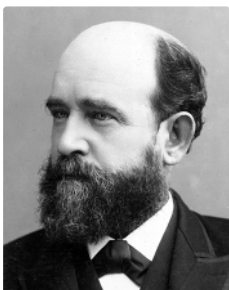
Some key parts of that story are particularly important to any exploration of the original ambition of the Garden city idea. Howard's *To-morrow*, like Thomas More's *Utopia*, is one of the landmarks of the utopian tradition. *To-morrow* was, above all, a synthesis of many of the key ideas circulating at the time. Influenced by visionary thinkers such as Henry George, Peter Kropotkin, William Morris and John Ruskin and among others, Howard managed to combine a visionary sense of how people could live and a key financial measure to make that vision a reality.⁹ The heart of his vision was the idea of the Social City – a network of new towns (Garden Cities), linked by rapid public transport, which together would provide all the benefits of a much larger city. These new communities would replace slums with high-quality housing for working people, and each house would have a decent garden and generous play space for children. The Garden Cities would provide the best blend of town and country, not just allowing access to the natural environment but bringing that environment into the heart of the town, thus facilitating healthy and sociable lifestyles.

A year after publishing *To-morrow*, Howard and his supporters formed the Garden City Association (subsequently renamed the 'Garden Cities and Town

Planning Association' before finally settling on the 'Town and Country Planning Association' in 1941). In 1903, the Association set up the Garden City Pioneer Company to find a site for a new community, and subsequently First Garden City Limited was formed to build the first Garden City at Letchworth. In parallel to the work at Letchworth, the movement inspired by Howard led to the first town planning Act in 1909 and to the formation of what is now the Royal Town Planning Institute. Howard's ideas are part of the core DNA of the values of town planning as a movement and as a profession.

In 1913 the then Garden Cities and Town Planning Association established an International Garden Cities and Town Planning Association to spread the Garden City idea world-wide. Inter-war council housebuilding under the slogan of 'Homes fit for heroes' saw the development of numerous housing estates calling themselves 'Garden Suburbs', despite being far from representative of Howard's model (a point of great distress for the Garden City movement). The design aspects of Howard's model had become a dominant aesthetic, but the underpinning elements of economic and social transformation were increasingly being downplayed.

Meanwhile, Letchworth's co-operative ethos attracted, in George Orwell's view, 'every sandal-wearing, vegetarian, teetotaler'¹⁰ – an association which in later years those campaigning for the New Towns programme tried their best to shrug off. In 1912



Left to right:
Henry George,
Peter Kropotkin,
William Morris, and
Ebenezer Howard

⁷ See <https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/zones/garden-city-museum>

⁸ K Henderson, K Lock and H Ellis: *The Art of Building a Garden City: Designing New Communities for the 21st Century*. RIBA Publishing, 2017

⁹ A more detailed exposition of the origins of the Garden City movement is set out in Chapter 1 of K Henderson, K Lock and H Ellis: *The Art of Building a Garden City: Designing New Communities for the 21st Century*. RIBA Publishing, 2017

¹⁰ G Orwell: *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Victor Gollancz, 1937

The Garden City idea in the 21st century

Frederic James Osborn, a former clerk, joined the Howard Cottage Society at Letchworth as secretary and manager. Soon becoming a leading figure in the Garden City movement, he quickly concluded that it was necessary for the state to take a key role in delivery to enable the realisation of the Garden City idea on the ground. But Howard, frustrated with the pace of progress and too impatient to wait for state involvement, arranged the purchase of land for a second Garden City experiment at Welwyn in 1919. After playing a key role in Welwyn Garden City's delivery (alongside an active role its social life, as a resident), Osborn went on to be the driving force behind the New Towns programme that formed a major part of reconstruction in Britain after the Second World War.

Howard's ideas have a wide appeal, and over time the TCPA has emphasised different aspects of the Garden City – from Osborn's application of the lessons of Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities to the post-war New Towns programme, to Colin Ward's anarchist suggestion of a self-build new town and the Association's 1979 prospectus for a 'Third Garden City',¹¹ and to the language of sustainable development (which Howard would have instantly recognised). Over the last ten years, the Association's work has focused on advocating the principles that could deliver Garden Cities in a modern context. When people ask why we are concerned with the detail of land value capture, with community stewardship or with citizens' rights, it is because they are central to a practical realisation of places in which everyone can thrive – and fundamental to the principles of the Garden City idea.

In 2011, the TCPA reignited the conversation about the relevance of Howard's ideas for the 21st century. Over the past decade, interest in the Garden City movement has attracted attention from practitioners and from government at all levels.¹² However, despite reference to 'Garden City principles' in national policy, and a commitment by many councils and developers to higher ambitions and standards, this interest has so far failed to result in the holistic realisation of the Garden City idea.¹³ While the enthusiasm for the Garden City label has been genuine, the failure of government at all levels to adopt its core underpinning philosophy has been the biggest challenge in achieving real change. It has led to the creation of places that are a world away from the Garden City model outlined in *To-morrow*, but which nevertheless carry its name.

Complete misrepresentation of the Garden City idea has sometimes been the result, often distilled into a narrative distracted by housing density, architectural style, and tree-lined streets. There is no doubt that these elements made the idea attractive and acceptable in policy terms for politicians over the course of a century; but without an underpinning of justice and democracy these elements appear as little more than hollow window dressing.

However, there are reasons for hope. There is a growing realisation that combining the best of town and country – from walkable neighbourhoods to easy access to nature – can have major benefits for health and wellbeing. Community-led models of development have become increasingly popular and have attracted interest from government. The concept of long-term stewardship has become an important issue and has, partly through necessity, become the element of the Garden City idea that is perhaps most likely to have continued resonance. In the Covid-19-inspired debate about recreating society anew, we need to re-ignite the Garden City movement as a voice for radical thinking about how we might live – and not allow the Garden City to be used as cover for low-density, car-based development or as a marketing approach for volume housebuilders.

11 'A Third Garden City: Outline Prospectus'. *Town & Country Planning*, 1979, Vol. 48, Oct.-Dec., 227-35

12 In 2019, in unpublished research, the TCPA reviewed 460 Local Plans (of which 260 were adopted Local Plans). Of these, 70 made reference to Garden Cities, Garden Suburbs, Garden Villages or Garden Settlements. Of these, 36 Local Plans (affecting 42 local authority areas) mentioned Garden Cities as part of policy (of these, 19 Local Plans were adopted)

13 Further details are set out in Chapter 2 of K Henderson, K Lock and H Ellis: *The Art of Building a Garden City: Designing New Communities for the 21st Century*. RIBA Publishing, 2017

Part 2

The Garden City idea today

The Tomorrow 125 project is promoting a conversation about people's understanding of the Garden City idea – with the project Sounding Board, with partner organisations, and with wider audiences through events and the online survey. It cannot be claimed that these conversations are either comprehensive or representative of society as a whole, but they have included many of the voices currently working in the sector, as well as many of those with an interest in the Garden City movement. The conversations sought clarity about what the Garden City idea actually means, and have also involved confronting culturally entrenched views about Howard's work that have contributed to a sense among many that the Garden City has little relevance today.

The strongest of these preconceptions is of the Garden City as a specific design idea, based on Howard's own diagrams of how a new Garden City *might* be laid out and organised. These spatial representations of the Garden City idea are important and useful, but in many ways they mask the powerful core of the concept. We need to go beyond them to see the underpinning drive for tangible and holistic change aimed at making a fairer and more sustainable future. In short, the design of a Garden City and its detailed delivery mechanisms were the means of securing an outcome which is now largely obscured. Perhaps the Tomorrow 125 project's biggest contribution so far has been in revisiting Howard's foundational objectives.

What is the Garden City idea really about?

Howard was a magpie for good ideas: his writing is that of a master-synthesiser and is without purist ideology. It offers a generous, inclusive and peaceful agenda which does not aim to control or mould human behaviour, but instead seeks to enable and nurture what is best in humanity. The Garden City idea was and remains the one of least authoritarian suggestions for social organisation, depending as it does on the triumph of goodwill and co-operation over greed and bad faith. It is humane and adaptable, which is why it has both endured and been subject to such spectacular distortion. For the sake of progressing the exploration and understanding of the Garden City idea, it may be seen as having three broad foundations, as follows.

Foundational principle 1

For people and the planet – human wellbeing should be our point of departure in thinking about the future

Howard never claimed to be a great philosopher, but he started from a broad moral assumption that human beings are capable of kindness and co-operation. As he saw it, the core task before us is to construct conditions of life which enable people to thrive. So he began with the welfare of the human condition as the first test or foundation of the Garden City. There was nothing religious or dogmatic in this view, although it was informed by the moral fashions of the time and Howard's nonconformist background and anti-authoritarian leanings.

He recognised that people are diverse and complex but also creative and co-operative, and he sought a way in which communities could organise to meet the complexity of human needs. This, in part, is why the Edwardian media sneered at the early residents of the pioneering Letchworth Garden City – too many artistic, vegetarian, sandal-wearing cranks reading poetry among the trees. Such ideas and behaviours have become unremarkable now, but they were indicators of both the ambition and the inclusiveness of the Garden City movement. The movement also stands in stark contrast to the 20th-century experiments in social organisation of the far right and the far left, which were defined by quite staggering levels of authoritarianism.

With a starting point of meeting human needs, it is easy to see why Howard became interested in the marriage of the very best of town and country. From John Ruskin and William Morris, he took the assumption that human beings are part of nature, and not separate from it. We are dependent on nature for all aspects of our lives, so to prioritise human wellbeing is also to prioritise a sustainable planet – the two are indivisible. He accepted the spiritual value of nature and laid across that the information that was then emerging on the value of fresh air, exercise, sunlight and wholesome food for human health and wellbeing.

But Howard's vision was more sophisticated than simplistic ideas of 'back to the land' as it recognised the value of many aspects of city life – its vibrant and creative culture, the availability of art and entertainment,

its institutions of learning, and, above all, the ways in which it could meet the human need for sociability. In merging the best of town and country he hoped to create the ideal human environment – one without the isolation and lack of productive work then found in the countryside or the overcrowding, pollution and shocking housing conditions of the industrial city.

The practical outcome of this focus on human thriving was reflected in all aspects of the design of Letchworth, from the humanistic Art and Crafts architecture, to the generous provision of private and social spaces and the physical integration of town and country in the layout of the town.

Foundational principle 2

For a fairer society – democracy and self-organisation are essential in making change happen

Howard was a committed democrat and wrote in detail about how democracy, with equality in voting rights, would work in practice in a Garden City. But here the influence of the anarchist Peter Kropotkin gives the Garden City added depth and spice. Democracy was seen both as a vital fulfilment of the basic human need to have agency over key aspects of life and as a practical way of organising human affairs. Howard also assumed that many more aspects of daily life would be subject to the democratic control of the community through co-operative and municipal organisation. Because the assets of a Garden City were in the hands of the community, local democracy was to be meaningful in shaping the decisions that mattered to people. Howard was also famously suspicious of the central state, partly because of its obvious inactivity in solving the problems that he was interested in. He was not so much ideologically anti-state as of the view that it is mostly ineffective in actually making things happen.

However, questions over the limits to community self-organisation became a critical argument in the Garden City movement. The lessons from Letchworth's under-capitalisation and, as a result, slow development, and real disagreements among the personalities involved in building the Garden City, led Frederic Osborn to see the state as having a central enabling role in delivering new communities. It was that assumption that shaped the post-war New Towns programme. In the process, and despite Osborn's best exhortational efforts, the New Towns lost, as Howard might have seen it, the crucial element of community ownership. In the 1970s and 1980s Colin Ward advocated the 'do-it-yourself' new town and championed, along with others such as Tony Gibson, the power of co-operative self-build.¹⁴

Significantly, the question of the role of the state in enabling community development of any kind remains unanswered, but the prospect of a helpful and enabling government supporting communities is a tantalising one.



¹⁴ Further details on the TCPA's story are set out in Dennis Hardy's two-volume history of the Association – D Hardy: *From Garden Cities to New Towns: Campaigning for Town and Country Planning, 1899-1946*. E&FN Spon, 1991; and D Hardy: *From New Towns to Green Politics: Campaigning for Town and Country Planning, 1946-1990*. E&F Spon, 1991

Foundational principle 3

Land, finance and practical idealism – a co-operative economy and the sharing of development values provide the machinery of hope

The greater part of Howard's book sets out the complex economic machinery that proved to be so persuasive in promoting the Garden City idea. Anyone can dream about a new society, but very few find ways of making it a practical reality. And that practical test is the enduring challenge that Howard has left us. Dreaming of utopia is easy; but how do we pay for it?

There are two levels to Howard's economic approach. In the broadest terms, he wanted to flip the economy so that the profits from those activities core to community development would not be extracted for private gain, but instead would be reinvested for the benefit of the whole community. In that sense, it was a classic mutualised approach, closely related to contemporary notions of 'community wealth building'¹⁵ and control of the 'foundational economy'.¹⁶ It clearly built upon the values of the co-operative movement, but Howard's ideas provided a coherent framework within which to apply co-operative principles to a wide slice of local economic activity. In that sense, Howard's ideas prefigured the current debates about the creation of 'social value'.

It is important to make clear that, for Howard, the Garden City idea was not 'anti' the private sector in any ideological or dogmatic way. It is based on a mixed economy, with space for private enterprise, but the core activities necessary to secure the objectives of human thriving are to be conducted on a social basis. Administration of the financial heart of Howard's Garden City was to be carried out by a limited-dividend company, a private vehicle but with firm charitable commitments. The investment required to finance a Garden City project would be provided by private investors on a fixed rate of return, with lower returns being traded for investment security. Profits from the project were to be reinvested in the development process, as well as in a form of Garden City welfare state.

The early development of Letchworth, in which all key retail, utility and leisure facilities, along with land and housing, were mutualised, gives a glimpse of the Garden City ambition. Although the Spirella corset factory, which played a key part in the development of the town's economy, was in private hands, the overall economic approach appears extraordinarily radical now – but, at the time, in many cities, such as Birmingham and Liverpool, municipal enterprises controlled key functions upon which they depended. And in some industrial towns co-operatives dominated service delivery, from the baby's cradle to milk and bread delivery and an affordable burial.

If the headlines of Howard's model lie in this co-operative, municipal and mutualised approach, it is important to recognise that his detailed proposals represented a sophisticated way of capturing wealth and providing long-term income streams to pay, without the need for local taxation, for all the necessities of the good life, up to and including old-age pensions.

These values were created through the process of community development, founded on the increase in land values which arise from the development of agricultural land and, crucially, from the mutualised profits of the enterprises central in supporting urban life, such as the utilities. Sources of income included commercial rents from property, income from the agricultural estate, rental incomes from leasehold homes, and the profits from municipal enterprises (in the utilities) and other commercial activities. The periodic revaluation of rental incomes would allow for the fair distribution of increasing asset values. All of this was to be managed by a democratically accountable committee. In essence, Howard offered a detailed viability assessment for the delivery of a large-scale co-operative community and demonstrated how, over time, it could be financially self-sustaining.

¹⁵ See CLES's community wealth building webpages, at <https://cles.org.uk/the-community-wealth-building-centre-of-excellence/>

¹⁶ The foundational economy encompasses the material infrastructure at the foundation of civilised life – things such as water pipes and sewers, and providential services such as education, health care, and care for the old. The Welsh government has adopted the idea as part of its broader economic goals – see <https://gov.wales/foundational-economy>

The Garden City ‘weave’

Even in 1898, when *To-morrow* was published, the ideas contained within each of these three foundational principles were not new. What was unique was the way that Howard wove them together to create a powerful place-based vision of a better future for ordinary people, along with the enabling structures to deliver it. Expressing what can be abstract ideas in a way which shows what homes and streets could look like for ordinary people was an essential part of Howard’s persuasiveness. Place was his ‘growing medium’, grounding the Garden City ambition in the reality of people’s everyday lives.

As a result, the Garden City was genuinely a unique combination of proposals which offered an enabling framework for human society. Howard spelt out these ideas in a humane and non-doctrinaire way, making them attractive to a wide segment of late-Victorian society, including those he needed to get on board if the Garden Cities were to be built, with supporters ranging from philanthropic industrialists to aristocratic landowners gathered into the Garden City tent.

Myths surrounding the Garden City

It is significant that a great many criticisms of the Garden City idea relate not to the core of what Howard proposed but to potent myths that provide much easier targets – for example, that Howard argued for specific densities or that his ideas related only to new communities.

Most of such accusations are simply misplaced and their foundations are worth exploring further, but one in particular – that Howard ignored Britain’s existing urban fabric in favour of new places – perhaps highlights where his thinking is most misunderstood. It is true that, by comparison with the powerful language and detailed economics which dominate much of *To-morrow*, the final chapter on how existing places might change as a result of widespread adoption of the Garden City idea feels like a brief postscript. But the ideas contained within it are significant. In essence, Howard argued for the redevelopment of the existing industrial cities of Britain to much higher standards, and in some cases at lower densities, to offer a measure of the same quality of life that he hoped would be achieved in the new Garden Cities (although, admittedly, the economic assumptions are not as sure footed and depend on declining land prices resulting from Garden City inspired population shifts).

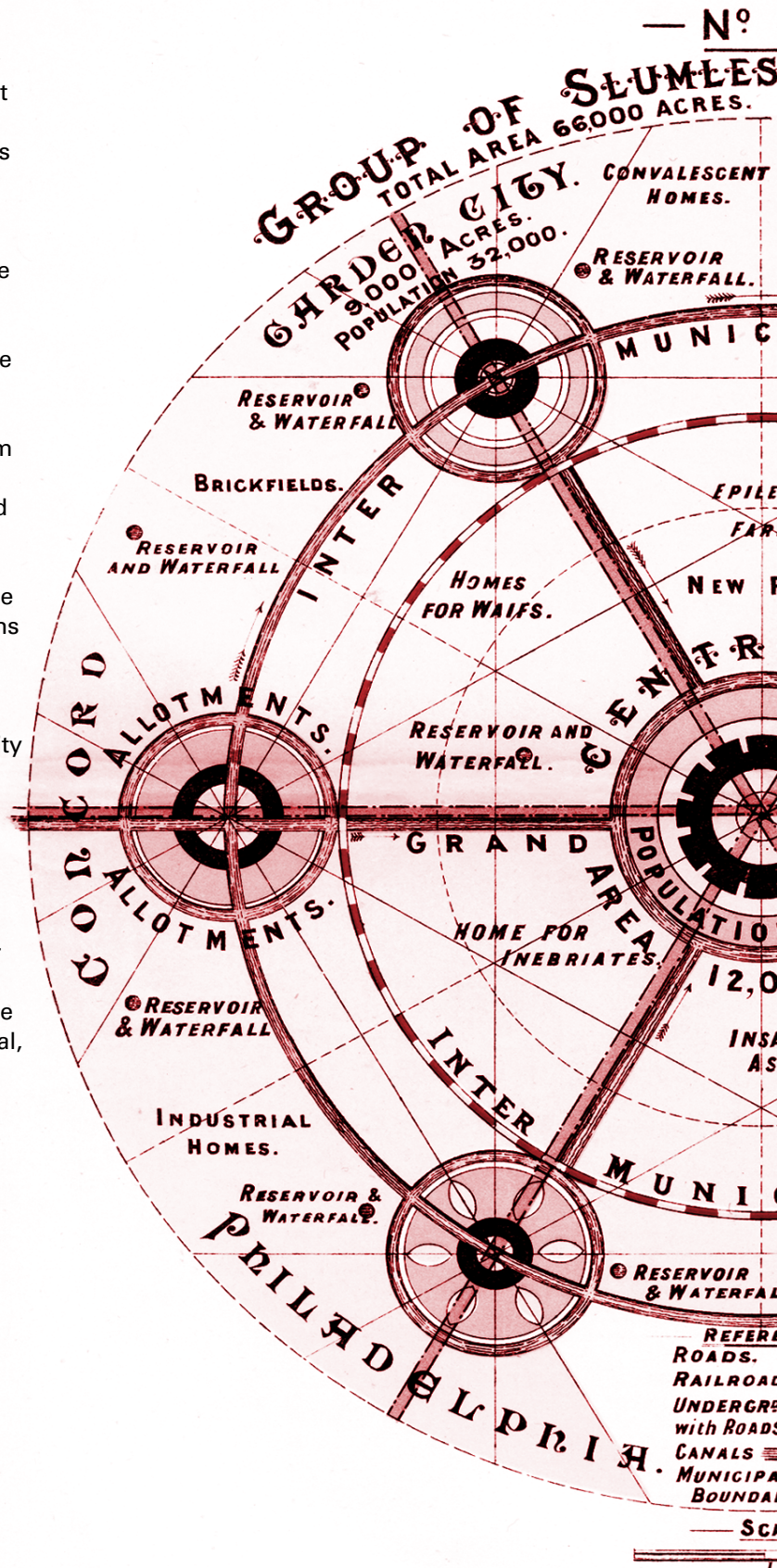
It is also clear that the general principles underpinning the Garden City – human wellbeing, democracy, and mutualised and local economic activity – are just as relevant to the regeneration of existing places as they are to the construction of new ones.

The Tomorrow 125 study has revealed that there are multiple layers and complexities to understanding public perception of the Garden City idea. Unpacking them and why they have developed will be a continuing theme throughout the project. One aspect may be seen as relating to people’s perception of *To-morrow* as being about physical design standards, with the

physical experiments in applying Howard's ideas at Letchworth and Welwyn as reference points. But, by attempting to illustrate how the ideas might play out in a real place, and setting out examples in terms of space provision or an ideal population size for towns in 1898, did Howard inadvertently undermine the longer-term realisation of his original vision, setting the stage for – for example – the inter-war housing estates which were built using the Garden City name yet betrayed the core of his idea?

Distinct from but linked to this misunderstanding are the myths around modern concepts such as the TCPA's Garden City Principles – what they represent or are aiming to achieve, and the links between them and government initiatives such as the 'Garden Communities' programme. The TCPA has succeeded in securing reference to 'Garden City principles' in national policy (in the National Planning Policy Framework), which has led to renewed interest in the Garden City idea and higher standards and ambitions in many places. But by identifying a set of policy-friendly principles, linked to politically welcoming images of beautiful and green places, did the TCPA risk contributing to the devaluation of the Garden City idea? Is the language simply being used to cloak a business-as-usual model which reflects nothing of the ambition of the original idea?

Whatever the root of the many myths surrounding the Garden City, we can be reasonably confident that current practice is not leading to the creation or renewal of places which reflect the true power of Howard's ideas. If social transformation to secure the health and wellbeing of people and planet is our goal, we need to re-examine the policy principles that might achieve this ambitious objective.



'Ebenezer Howard: low density; mix of town and country - been seized upon by developers as the ultimate green-washing.'

'I think the Garden City, in particular its development model, social ambition and connections with nature and the arts, is still very important. But it mustn't be used as an excuse to just deliver suburban housing with private gardens and poor accessibility except for the car.'

Tomorrow 125 survey respondents, answering the question 'What does the Garden City idea mean to you?'

'These limits exist at the boundary of ownership.'

'One massive problem is that the more people you get together to make a decision, the longer it can take to come to an agreement...'

'I am sorry, this whole issue of community organisation fills me with dread. What is *vital* is the rapid, serious and effective sharing and communication of really sound ecological knowledge and ideas...'

'I think we need to accept that some people are not interested. Many others do not have the time or energy to be heavily involved but do care. Change is generally driven by the few except in momentous events where the masses are swept along by the momentum or extreme situations. The ability to be involved, transparency and accountability should always be there, but we need to realise that not everyone will take part.'

Tomorrow 125 survey respondents, answering the question 'What are the limits of municipal/community self-organisation for the creation and renewal of places?'

'Enabling legislation for bottom-up development. Nothing more than that.'

'They should. They won't. Indeed they cannot.'

'As little as possible except providing funding and providing supporting legislation.'

Tomorrow 125 survey respondents, answering the question 'To what extent do you think central government should play an enabling role in the creation and renewal of places?'

'This will not happen in a capitalist society such as ours in which the pursuit of profit trumps all.'

'Of course it can work, as it does elsewhere in Europe, but EU and national governments have to provide a supportive framework for action which minimises barriers to bottom-up initiatives.'

Tomorrow 125 survey respondents, answering the question 'To what extent do you agree that a municipal local economic model can work in new and renewed places?'

Part 3

Implications for the project, and next steps

Stage 1 of the Tomorrow 125 project set out to test the broad relevance of the Garden City idea, uncovering the roots of Howard's vision and its relevance to the challenges of the 21st century. While the TCPA is a child of the Garden City movement, and clearly remains an advocate of the approach, it is important to understand how a wider group of partners relate to the ambition and relevance of the idea.

In reflecting on our conversations so far and the responses to the survey, it is significant that there are divergent views on the Garden City idea, which is variously seen as:

- a key to our collective future;
- a historic curiosity; or
- merely hollow green-washing.

Those divergent views reflect an uncomfortable reality: the Garden City idea is not well understood outside a small movement of committed individuals, and has not been helped by the adoption of the term to apply to a wide range of developments of varying quality.

Neither is the Garden City idea perceived by mainstream policy-makers as a solution to many of the acute problems confronting communities in the UK today. Instead, the whole idea of the 'town planning' movement which Howard's idea inspired is, at least within much of Westminster, largely seen as a problem, and not a source of solutions.

While the majority of responses to the survey question 'What does the Garden City idea mean to you?' referred to the physical design and layout of places – from criticisms of density to appreciation of walkable neighbourhoods – it was encouraging that many also referred to issues such as social justice and health and wellbeing. So far, there have been no direct challenges to the proposition that the original Garden City idea is, at its heart, about broad progressive social change. However, divergent views have been expressed about how change is to be achieved, or even if it is possible, and there is wide recognition that the current use of the Garden City 'label' is all too often disconnected from its roots. In this context, we have identified four high-level themes which flow out of the first phase of the Tomorrow 125 project and provide a framework for steps to be taken in stage 2.

Theme 1

The Garden City as a framework for social transformation (not a set of design standards)

Revisiting Howard's book has strengthened the TCPA's view that the root of the Garden City idea is not any rigid physical design code or a position on density: it is the peaceful transformation of society in order to best meet the core needs of ordinary people. It is this broad concern with gentle social transformation rather than any specific design, planning or economic mechanism which is the moral heart of the Garden City idea.

This implies the need for a significant re-examination of almost everything we think we know about the modern practice of town planning in England, with its focus on the highly procedural management of land use rather than wider social outcomes. It implies a need for an ambitious and hopeful narrative about a new kind of society which places people and the planet at the heart of our thinking. This broad ambition is the engine that drives the idea of the Garden City as a social movement and calls for a clear set of progressive values for the future. The precise mechanisms for how we get to that new society, in terms of planning practice, economics, and democracy, flow from that core assumption.

The significance of this conclusion is that the core values of the Garden City idea are not defined by their relevance to any particular historical context. Because they emerge from a smart and enduring understanding of the human condition, they will remain relevant to our collective future. They are also relevant to both new and existing places, even if the detail of how they work out in practice will flex within different economic and cultural contexts.

Theme 2

Refreshing and enriching the key elements of the Garden City idea

If social transformation is the broad objective of the Garden City idea, we have to be sure that the foundations of the idea are in good order – and that calls for an examination of each of the propositions set out in Part 2, above, to ensure that they are articulated in a detailed, credible and evidenced way. Consequently we need to address three key questions:

- 1** How robust is our definition of human thriving, and what does it mean in detail? Re-establishing human thriving as the key objective of the Garden City requires us to set out what that means in terms of living with nature, democratic agency, meaningful work and its availability, equality and social justice, and the role of art. Human thriving has to be articulated in detail and in practical terms.
- 2** How robust and credible is our notion of new democratic models for communities? The broad principles of community self-organisation and citizens' rights are powerful in principle, but there are difficult questions relating to the balance between the local and national state, and there are limited practical examples of enduring modes of empowered local governance in the UK.
- 3** Given the current dominance of the neoliberal economic model, how credible and coherent are the array of alternative economic models? Many of these models can be summarised as contributing to the generation of social values through a mix of mutualised, municipal and private means. The task is to align these approaches and test their ability to support the Garden City vision.

The survey results provide a helpful starting point in answering these questions, but the themes need to be interrogated further by the Sounding Board and partner organisations to ensure that they are coherent and resonant. This also provides an opportunity to enrich the Garden City idea with strands of contemporary thinking.¹⁷ Only then will it be possible to understand the detailed mechanisms necessary to support the foundational principles.

¹⁷ Such as, for example, the framework that Carnegie UK has developed around wellbeing in its strategy for change – see <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/carnegie-uk-strategy-for-change/>

Theme 3

The importance of offering practical pathways to a hopeful future

Part of Ebenezer Howard's success lay in casting his ideas onto the canvas of a real place. In this way he was able to talk about complex change in ways that communicated with the lives of ordinary people. This approach was complemented by discipline in providing detailed and practical solutions to the challenge of how to improve people's lives. These solutions were then tested in the extraordinary endeavour of actually building a Garden City. It is clear from other strands of the TCPA's work¹⁸ that this approach stands in stark contrast to a great deal of effort by charities and foundations who have become adept at problem identification but much less able to drive the practical change that many communities so urgently need.

Some of the most successful social networks, such as the Incredible Edible Network,¹⁹ are based on the simple proposition that demonstrating real practical change is the key to mobilising wider political support. The act of practical demonstration is worth, as Howard understood, a thousand theoretical propositions. While recognising that attention is drawn to the place itself rather than any ideas underpinning it when such ideas are demonstrated on the ground, the implication is that TCPA must move decisively to work with new and existing places to truly fulfil the practical ambition of the Garden City idea.

Theme 4

Understanding and rebuilding the Garden City 'brand'

In asking for views about the Garden City idea we have encountered a 'Catch 22' type of problem. How are people to decide whether they agree with it when the idea itself is so poorly understood? There is much talk today of '20-minute neighbourhoods' and '15-minute cities', but very little recognition that the concept of complete, compact neighbourhoods which link local economies and food production clearly relates back to the Garden City idea. This lack of recognition is entirely understandable in wider civil society, but it is surprising, for example, that Howard's thinking is no longer taught in any depth in planning schools.

To hold a robust debate, we have to devote greater attention to trying to understand the root of this misunderstanding and to communicating the wider ambition and opportunity presented by the core of the Garden City idea to a much wider audience. This also means also interrogating the foundational principles through the lens of the mechanisms and ideas currently linked to the Garden City name in policy, practice, and education.

By the end of this project, we hope to have restored the Garden City idea to its rightful place as a mainstream political solution to many of the challenges that our society now faces.

¹⁸ See, for example, the TCPA podcast *Two Teabags to Utopia*, at <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/two-tea-bags-to-utopia>

¹⁹ See the Incredible Edible Network website, at <https://www.incredibleedible.org.uk/>

Next steps in the Tomorrow 125 project

The next phase of the Tomorrow 125 project is to develop work around the four themes identified above. These strands of work will contribute to the foundations of the 'final statement' that will be published to mark the 125th anniversary of Howard's *To-morrow*. They will include:

- **Strengthening and testing the three foundational principles of the Garden City idea:** This will involve addressing the questions that this report has raised about the three foundational principles identified in stage 1 of the project through a series of written and multi-media papers and events. This process will be framed by the need to provide detailed definitions and packages of practical solutions. We will do this through the growing network of interest around the Tomorrow 125 project, through the project Sounding Board, and through strategic partnerships with organisations that have obvious relevance and connections to the Garden City idea or are thought-leaders in relation to each principle.
- **Interrogating and rebuilding the Garden City 'brand':** This will involve further interrogation of the devaluation of the Garden City as a term and idea in theory and practice. This work would be accompanied by a strong package of communication tools, events and interventions to promote the Garden City idea in relation to the three foundational principles.
- **Working with projects and places:** This will involve identifying communities where we could make a positive contribution to meeting development needs and where action would also help in stress-testing the ideas that we are developing. This will also enable us to consider both the long-term changes required to secure the conditions for everyone to thrive, and how we can support action on the ground right now to demonstrate what success looks like.

Conclusion

The Tomorrow 125 project has, for the first time in decades, provided an opportunity for the TCPA to take a detailed look at the core idea underpinning its work. Recent campaigns to promote the modern Garden City Principles have operated in the context of a development model that has always undermined attempts to make the holistically delivery of the Garden City idea a reality. From models of landownership to short political cycles, conditions have made it difficult for even the most ambitious councils to fully adopt the Garden City model. Alongside campaigning for changes to policy and legislation to enable councils to do so, the TCPA has spent a huge amount of energy defending the Garden City as a concept from those who, often for understandable reasons, feel that it relates to a specific building density or aesthetic or government initiative. The Garden City means much more than this, but revisiting its roots has not only revealed its extraordinary ambition but has confirmed the relevance of the core idea to the 21st century.

The project has highlighted the vastness and complexity of the task of reinvigorating Howard's original Garden City idea, but has also provided hope that there are many existing ideas, models and organisations that, if brought together to work in collaboration, could move towards a practical framework for action. But work on the project has also confirmed the extent of the disconnection between the core idea and many people's perception of the term 'Garden City' – and the extent to which the term has been misappropriated in the creation or renewal of places.

Despite campaign successes in promoting the Garden City Principles, the TCPA has, in fact, failed to communicate the core of the Garden City idea. Stage 2 of this project provides an opportunity to explore what can be done to address this failure. We hope that it will also lay a solid foundation for a final output which sets out a landscape of hopeful solutions to deliver practical changes to improve the health, wellbeing and life chances of all our communities. This requires us to frame the Garden City idea as a long-term vision for a new society that is practically realisable. We hope that you will continue with us on this journey.

Appendix

Online survey questions

In September 2021 the TCPA launched an online survey, which was open for eight weeks. The 43 responses to the survey fed into this report, and a summary of the themes emerging from the responses is available on the Tomorrow 125 website at <https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/zones/school-university>

1 The Garden City idea means different things to different people. What does the Garden City idea mean to you?

Designing for people and planet: The Garden City idea assumed that we should design places to meet human needs (what some might refer to as wellbeing) as part of a healthy natural environment through peaceful and co-operative means. This meant recognising an indivisible connection between nature, art, and people. Ebenezer Howard suggested that this was via a 'joyous union' of town and country – the best of both worlds.

2a To what extent is this ambition to design places to meet the human need to connect with nature, art and other people a realistic ambition for creating and renewing places today?

2b What practical examples, from the UK or internationally, can you recommend?

Democracy and power: Howard expected Garden Cities to be developed through bottom-up community self-organisation. He took as read the need for democracy in the Garden City and wrote in detail about how that would work in practice, based on equality in voting rights. He also assumed that many more aspects of daily life would be subject to democratic control by the community through municipal organisation. Because the assets of a Garden City were in the hands of the community, local democracy was to be meaningful in shaping the decisions that mattered to people. The question of how far community self-organisation can go became a critical argument in the Garden City movement. Later Garden City advocates felt that to make this a reality central government needed to play an enabling role.

3a What are the limits of municipal/community self-organisation for the creation and renewal of places?

3b To what extent do you think central government should play an enabling role in the creation and renewal of places?

3c What relevant and practical examples of these approaches (community self-organisation to create places and/or government-enabled but locally led development processes), from the UK or internationally, can you recommend?

A shared economy: In the broadest terms, Howard wanted to ensure that the profits from those activities which are core to community development would not be extracted for private gain, but would instead be reinvested for the benefit of the whole community. There are two levels to this economic approach. First, that many local activities (from the companies building the Garden City, to the shops and theatres which serve it) would be municipal enterprises, essentially owned and run by local people for the benefit of the wider community. They would run alongside private enterprise and investment. The second but related aspect was that, because the land was controlled by an organisation working on behalf of the community, income from commercial rents from property and the agricultural estate, and rents from leasehold homes, alongside income from the municipal enterprises, would be reinvested in the community. Together, they would make the development financially self-sustaining over time.

4a To what extent do you agree that a municipal local economic model can work in new and renewed places?

4b To what extent do you agree that the development model for creating and renewing places should enable a fairer sharing of the profits of the development process?

4c What practical examples, from the UK or internationally, can you recommend?

5 If the Garden City idea is no longer relevant to the 21st century, what is our next big idea?