

The Garden City: saviour or dead end?

Ebenezer Howard's Garden City idea was a practical way of securing the good life by creating conditions in which everyone can thrive. It was a uniquely practical vision based on sharing the values created from developing places. It proved to be one of the most influential and enduring examples of an alternative and sustainable way of living that the UK has ever produced. Despite its problems it remains a powerful and hopeful blueprint for a humane future in an era framed by the health, climate and biodiversity crisis.

As we build up to the 125th anniversary of the publication of ‘Tomorrow: a peaceful path to real reform’ in 2023, the TCPA is asking how useful the Garden City idea is to help us in identifying a solution to our collective future? We are asking this question knowing that the label ‘garden city’ is a much abused and devalued term. Used by some to ‘greenwash’ bad development and by others simply to mean soulless suburbs. Howard’s work might be the foundation of town planning in the UK, but his hopeful ideas are rarely applied and are invisible to the communities who need change the most.

This paper is a ‘living’ document and seeks to distil the TCPA’s latest thinking on the core foundations and challenges around exploring the Garden City idea today. It will evolve throughout the course of the project.

The Tomorrow 125 Project

The Tomorrow 125 project hopes to inspire a rich conversation about the value of the Garden City ideals and their relevance to how we will organise the future in a time of crisis. It is important to say from the outset that we are not asking permission to express the radical idealism and practical hope that the Garden City idea encompasses. Instead, we are asking whether the details of the mechanism which Howard created in 1898 are relevant and workable for the challenges of the 21st century. To do this, we need to strip away a great deal of baggage and misconceptions which have grown around Howard's work so we can see the clarity of the original vision.

This paper tries to set the context for the conversation we hope to have. It starts by describing the current reputation of the Garden City and then reveals the components of the Garden City idea. It gives a flavour of how these ideas were to be delivered through a practical mechanism for a hopeful future which is so brilliantly described in Howard’s book. It explores the assumptions Howard made about the human condition and why, in an era in which hope is in short supply, the Garden City conception just might be the most complete and the most compelling answer to how we can live together.

Clearing the ground. The state of the Garden City idea in the 21st century

There are three broad views of the Garden City idea in modern society:

1. The first and dominant view is that the words 'Garden City' are code for a form of bland low-density suburbia of soulless mock-Tudor homes. In this view the Garden City is no more than a design label that can be applied to anything from a single cul-de-sac to a large urban extension. The worst aspect of this is the way the 'Garden City' is used to greenwash poor quality development. The Westminster government's Garden Communities Programme distils this pick and mix approach to the Garden City idea. While a good deal of this development has been better than the average, the reality is that the term has come to mean slightly bigger housing development (anything over 1500 homes) with a slightly higher design ambition than the 'norm'. The vast majority of these developments have no relationship with Howard's Garden City idea.
2. The second notion is that the Garden City idea has simply become part of the (antique) furniture; an old-fashioned idea that is irrelevant for the challenges we face today. Some consider it no more than a late Victorian fad supported by a few heroic simpletons. This is a view partly informed by an awareness of the radical heart of the Garden City and in particular that simple but challenging aspect – the idea of sharing development values for the benefit of the wider community. Thinking about the values arising from development as a shared asset is, and will probably always be, one of the most controversial questions in global politics. So, while those with assets have been highly successful in answering the question 'how are we going to live?' in favour of private interests, they have also been highly effective in characterising anyone who asks about fairness in land economy as a crank.
3. The third view of the Garden City idea is the one advocated by the TCPA, an organisation established by Howard to promote the Garden City idea. Because Howard was a nonconformist and anti-authoritarian his ideas have a wide bandwidth. And so, overtime, the TCPA has emphasised different aspects of the Garden City idea from Frederic J Osborn's application of the lessons of Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities to the new towns programme, to Colin Ward's anarchist suggestions for a self-build New Town, to the embracing of the language of sustainable development which Howard would have instantly recognised. Over the last 10 years the Association's work has been focused on advocating the principles which could deliver on the Garden City idea in a modern development context. When people ask us why we are concerned with the detail of land value capture, with community stewardship or with citizens' rights, it is because they link to the founding principles of the Garden City idea. They are central to our concern with creating a good life for everyone.

Why have this conversation now?

The 125th anniversary of 'Tomorrow' is worth celebrating 'in its own right'. But that on its own is not enough. As we move from a health pandemic into a climate crisis the question of how human beings can live together in peace and in harmony with the planet upon which we depend is the political question of our time. Our contention is that no one has answered that question as compellingly or as affectively as Howard's ideas. With time running out we need to test whether the detail of the ideas still work and, if so, what needs to be done to update them.

The podcast '[Two tea bags to utopia](#)' sets out some of the problems our society is confronting and just how badly we lack a positive alternative approach. It also concluded that there was this 'other Britain' filled with local communities finding solutions to the problems which confront their everyday lives. Fragmented yes, but alive and kicking and seeking alternative approaches.

As we planned this project during the lockdown, the TCPA's Director of Policy was sent an apple tree through the post. When it arrived, it had been in transit for far too long and had dried out. For purely emotional reasons he planted the dead tree anyway, watering it regularly. The tree remained dead. After six months he came to dig out the tree and found that below the graft, the rootstock had started to sprout. Not an elegant apple tree, but something older and stronger and very much alive.

And that is how we feel about the Garden City idea. Over the last 125 years, structures were grafted onto this root desire for better social organisation. Democratic planning, sustainable development and all the legal baggage that goes with state organisation. These branches have now been stripped away by deregulation and austerity. But, this has revealed the rootstock, which is still there and alive and flowering in the desire of communities to improve their lives, connect with each other and nature and to offer a practical and hopeful future for the next generation.

Perhaps more than any other decade since Howard wrote the book, the 2020s feels like a decade of critical decisions about our future. On some issues like climate change it is, undoubtedly, our last throw of dice.

The deep roots of the Garden City

Howard's notion of a Garden City didn't magically appear from nowhere. It was rooted in a broad set of ideas around the British utopian tradition. This tradition had been asking the questions about land and freedom and ideal forms of social organisation, from Thomas More's 'Utopia' in 1514, to Gerrard Winstanley's 1649 call for the common ownership of land, to Thomas Spence's radical ideas about municipal ownership which formed the heart of The Chartists movement's approach to ideal communities. The social upheaval of the 19th century led to another outpouring of these ideas from John Ruskin to William Morris, to Prince Kropotkin to Edward Bellamy and Henry George. These ideas were partly literary visions of the future, but they also included detailed and radical platforms. For land reform, the redistribution of wealth, equal opportunity, the liberating role of art, an anarchist approach to local organisation and personal liberty and the vital importance of our relationship with nature. They shared a common revulsion of the poverty and inequality of the industrial 19th century city. Their ideas were expressed, to some extent, in the small but influential philanthropic communities of Bournville, New Earswick and Port Sunlight.

Howard's distinctive contribution to this debate was to weave these ideas together expressing them as a real community and then showing the practical way it could be delivered. While many others were content with radical visions and complex theory his great discipline was to ask, '*how would this work in practice?*' His contribution was to invent the mechanism to deliver a society which put the welfare of human beings first and then constructed an economy to meet those needs. In other words, to gently stand the existing economy on its head to support human well-being.

The heart of the idea

Howard was a magpie for good ideas and so you won't find any sharp-edged purist ideology in his writing. This is a generous, inclusive and peaceful agenda which does not seek to control human behaviours but does hope to enable what's best in humanity. This was not an authoritarian machine for social organisation. Instead, it depended on the triumph of goodwill and cooperation over greed and bad faith. The Garden City idea is humane and adaptable, which is why it has both endured and been subject to such spectacular distortion.

For the sake of promoting our conversation we suggest you can see the Garden City idea as having 3 broad foundations.

1 For People and Planet: *Human well-being 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 were capable of kindness and cooperation. The core task was to construct the conditions of a life which enables human beings to thrive. So, we began with the welfare of the human condition as the first test 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. It accepted people as diverse and complex but also creative and cooperative and sought to organise communities to meet those complex needs. This is partly why the Edwardian media sneered at the early residents of Letchworth Garden City. Too many artistic, vegetarian, sandal wearing cranks reading poetry in the trees! All of these ideas and behaviours have become unremarkable now, but they were indicators both of the ambition and inclusiveness of the Garden Cities. It also stands in stark contrast with all the 20th century experiments in social organisation of the far right and the far left, which were defined by a staggering level of authoritarianism.

If the starting point of the Garden City is to meet human needs, then we can see why Howard became interested in the marriage of the very best of town and country. From John Ruskin and William Morris, he takes 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 well-being is to prioritise a sustainable planet. The two ideas are indivisible.** He accepted both the spiritual value of nature and laid across that the data that was emerging on the value of fresh air, exercise, sunlight, wholesome food and clean air to human health and well-being. But Howard's vision is more sophisticated than simplistic ideas of 'back to the land' because it recognised the value of many aspects of city life. The vibrant and creative culture, the availability of art and entertainment, the institutions of learning and, above all, the human need for sociability. In colliding the best of town and country he hoped to create the ideal human environment avoiding the poverty and isolation of the countryside and the overcrowding, pollution and shocking housing conditions of the industrial city.

2 For a Fairer Society: *Democracy and self-organisation are essential to make change happen*

Howard 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. But here the influence of the anarchist Kropotkin gives the Garden Cities an added depth and spice. Howard assumed that many more aspects of daily life would be subject to the democratic control of 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. Howard was also famously suspicious of the central state partly because of its obvious inactivity in solving the problems that Howard was interested in. Again, this isn't Howard being ideologically anti state so much as recognising that it was mostly useless in actually making things happen.

But the question of how far community self-organisation can go became a critical argument in the Garden City movement. The lessons from Letchworth about undercapitalisation and, as a result, slower than hoped for development, and the real disagreements amongst the personalities involved in the Garden City, led Frederic Osborn to see the state as having a central enabling role in new communities. It was that assumption that shaped the New Towns programme. In the process, and despite his best efforts, post war New Towns lost a crucial element of community ownership. Colin Ward pushed back in the 1970s with his do-it-yourself new town and championed, along with people like Tony Gibson, the power of cooperative self-build. Significantly **the question about what role the**

state should play in enabling community development of any kind remains unanswered but the prospect of a helpful and enabling government supporting communities is a tantalizing one.

3 Land, Finance and Practical Idealism: A cooperative economy and sharing development values provide the machinery of hope

The greater part of Howard's book sets out the complex economic machinery which proved to be so persuasive in 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 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, Howard wanted to flip the economy so the profits from those activities core to community development would not be extracted for private gain and instead reinvested for the benefit of the whole community. In that sense it was a classic mutualised approach based on what might now be called 'control of the foundational economy'. It clearly built upon the values of the cooperative movement, but his ideas gave a coherent framework to apply cooperative principles to a wide slice of local economic activity. In that sense Howard's ideas prefigured all the contemporary debates about the creation of social value.

It is important to be clear that for Howard the Garden City was not 'anti' the private sector in any ideological or dogmatic way. The Garden City idea is based on a mixed economy, with space for private enterprise, but also where the core activities necessary to secure the objectives of human thriving are conducted on a social rather than anti-social basis. The administration of the financial heart of Howard's Garden City was to be carried out by a limited dividend company, a private sector vehicle but with charitable commitments. The private investment required to finance a Garden City project would provide a return for investors, but in addition, a share to lead the development process as well as reinvest in a form of Garden City welfare state.

The early development of Letchworth Garden City in which all key retail, utilities, leisure activities along with land and housing were mutualised gives a glimpse of the ambition. The Spirella corset factory which played a key part in the development of the town's economy was, however, in private hands. This overall economic approach appears extraordinarily radical now but at the time municipal enterprises controlled all the key functions upon which many cities like Birmingham and Liverpool depended. In some industrial town's cooperatives dominated service delivery from the baby's cradle to milk and bread to an affordable burial.

If the headlines of Howard's model lie in this cooperative, municipal and mutualised approach then it's important to recognise that his detailed proposals represented a sophisticated way of capturing values 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. The values were created through the process of community development they were founded on; the increasing land values which arise from the development of agricultural land and crucially from the mutualised profits of the enterprises core to the support of urban life like utilities. The detailed sources included commercial rents from property, the agricultural estate, rental incomes from leasehold homes and from municipal enterprises and other commercial activities. The periodic revaluation of rental incomes allowed for the fair distribution of increasing asset values. All of this was to be managed by a central committee. In essence Howard offers a detailed viability assessment for the delivery of a large-scale cooperative community and demonstrated how, over time, it could be financially self-sustaining.

The Garden City weave

Even in 1898 the ideas contained within each of these three strands were not new. What was unique was the way Howard wove them together to create a powerful place-based vision of a better future for ordinary people and the enabling structures to deliver it. It was genuinely a unique combination of proposals which offered an enabling framework for human society. Howard sold these ideas in a humane and nondoctrinaire way, making them attractive to a wide segment of late Victorian society who he needed to get the Garden Cities built. Everyone from philanthropic industrialists to aristocratic landowners were in the Garden City tent.

The Chapter 13: the bit no one reads

Going back to Howard's original Garden City idea is a reminder of just how many myths have built up about his proposals. And the final part of that mythology is that Howard was only interested in the creation of new communities. His ideas are often dismissed as utopian because people argued they ignored Britain's existing urban fabric. And it's true that after the powerful language and detailed economics which dominates Howard's work, chapter 13 feels like a bit of a postscript. But the ideas contained within it, although brief, are significant. In essence, Howard is arguing for the redevelopment of the existing industrial cities of Britain at much higher standards, and in some cases at lower densities to enable a measure of the same quality of life that he hoped to achieve in the new Garden Cities. Admittedly, the economic assumptions are not as sure footed and depend on declining land prices that resulted from population shifts.

The contemporary challenge for us is how a current trend for densification of places like London can be made compatible with decent lives and the climate crisis. It's also clear that the general principles which underpinned the Garden Cities, of human well-being, democracy, mutualised and local economic activity, present just as powerful answer to the regeneration of existing places as they do for the construction of new ones.

The Garden City legacy

The Garden City concept has an impressive legacy - from the founding of Letchworth through to the New Towns programme led by Frederic Osborn, to the transformation of working-class housing standards by Raymond Unwin and a rich legacy of international influence. But, that said, there are obvious challenges to all three strands of the Garden City idea.

First, Howard's attempt to put the needs of human beings before profit maximisation has not been adopted on any large scale. In fact, trickle down, a much-discredited economic idea, is still the dogma of successive governments and as a result the lives of millions of people in our society are limited by a lack of access to the basic conditions which could enable them to thrive.

Second, far from having a thriving and participative local democracy, a great deal of power has been centralised. We appear to be satisfied with turnout rates for local elections which can be less than 20%. Again, Howard's hopes for local self-organisation are alive and well in many communities but it is certainly not a mainstream part of how we organise local communities.

Finally, there is little sign of the widespread application of Howard's machinery for sharing values. Realities like the current political fixation with owner occupation or legal changes in the Leasehold Reform Act have reduced the scope for some of his detailed proposals. Howard also underestimated the degree to which the speculators would attempt to get their hands on Letchworth's assets as they began to mature. The task of creating a Garden City now seems less demanding than defending it

when it became a financial success. But, in a more general sense, it's clear that the values being created from new development are even more significant than Howard could have anticipated even if we have ineffective ways of harnessing those values for public benefit.

There remains an enduring brilliance about the way Howard expressed ideas about the future in a complete vision for a place. At its best the Garden City is a beacon of peaceful humane and healthy living. If there was a flaw it is perhaps that Howard assumed that everyone had the same level of generosity and goodwill that he possessed. Creating an island of cooperation in a wider system dominated by highly speculative, exploitative and extractive economy was, and remains, an ambitious idea.

Conclusion

You may not agree with the Garden City idea, but the TCPA would argue that it cannot be dismissed as an outdated design idea about cul de sacs and suburbs. It is not solely about the physical way we plan places, even if it gave birth to town planning in the UK. At its core, it is about building a kinder society in which the needs of everyone are met. This is a high ambition and in reflecting on the legacy of the Garden Cities it is possible to see successes and failures. What is interesting is the remarkable learning about what worked and what did not, from the role of the state in community development to the power of self-organisation, from municipal development models to the free-market fire sale of the New Town assets in the 1980s. From the ambition to live in harmony with nature to converting office blocks to rabbit hutch homes.

One thing is certain and that is that our current approach to the development of new and renewed communities appears to wilfully ignore all the significant lessons of the past. Our current development model essentially places the needs of private sector property owners first and human well-being second. It's a model which is defined and enabled by the recent deregulation of the planning system in England, by the failure to set basic housing standards, the lack of investment in socially rented homes, the critical failure to deal with the climate crisis and, as a result, the failure to secure the long-term health and well-being of our population. We desperately need a better way of living.

In this context, re-examining the Garden City idea is not a journey down memory lane. It's an urgent inquiry into how we can survive and live in a time of crisis and ultimately how human beings can live peaceful and prosperous lives on a sustainable planet. That is the question at the heart of the Tomorrow 125 project.

What do you think?

Agree? Disagree? We'd love to hear your thoughts. For the latest information on the Tomorrow 125 Project and to contribute, please visit www.tomorrow125.org.uk

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