

a practical path to a hopeful tomorrow

The deep-rooted moral philosophy underpinning the Garden City model, seeking democratic places – designed for justice and with a mutualised economy – is just what we need to address the challenges of today, say **Hugh Ellis** and **Katy Lock**

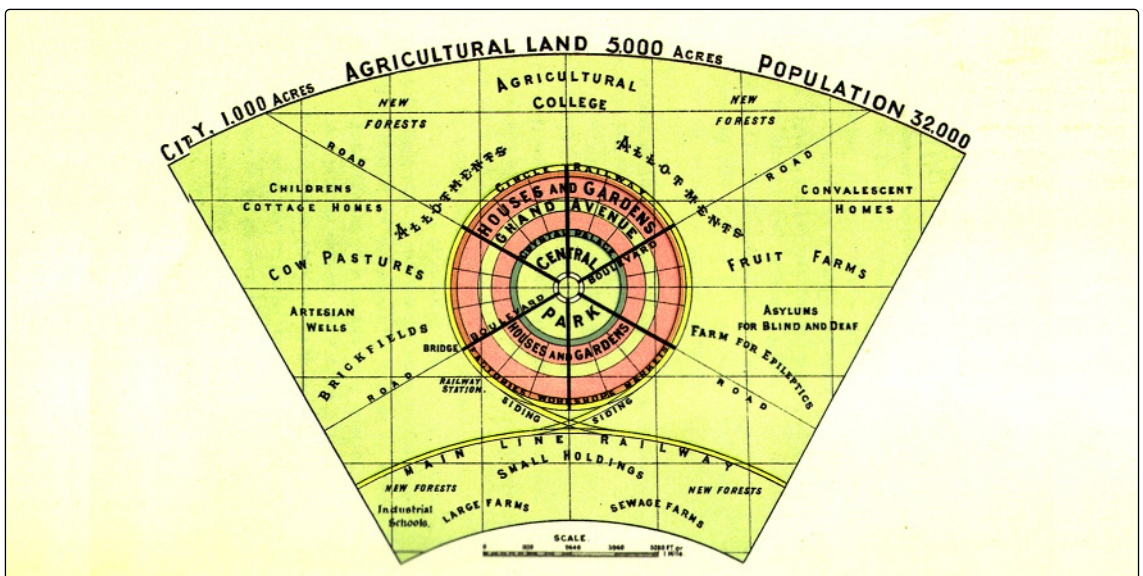


Diagram No. 2, 'Garden City', from *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* – 'the combination of moral philosophy and practical action embodied in Ebenezer Howard's approach remains our best hope in planning for a resilient future'

Welwyn Garden City remains an iconic part of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City legacy. Reflected in its story are all the hopes and struggles of a movement that dared to ask the biggest question of any civilised society: 'How are we going to live?' Welwyn Garden City also embodies the hopes, successes and failures of the New Towns programme that followed on from the development of the Garden Cities of Letchworth and Welwyn – a movement of great achievement, but one which drifted away from much of the Garden City philosophy.

A century later, what is the relevance of the Garden City legacy for the future of our towns and cities? The problem with answering this question is that the legacy is complicated, and the forces affecting the future of our towns and cities are equally so. The Garden City legacy is partly about

specific measures such as land value capture and long-term stewardship which define the practical way that the Garden City Principles can deliver inclusive places. But it is also rooted in the practical expression of a powerful moral philosophy that reflects a desire for social justice and advocates peaceful, co-operative coexistence.

This special edition of *Town & Country Planning* celebrates Welwyn Garden City's centenary with reflections from those living in and writing about the Garden City, and with contributions from some of the voices from the International Garden Cities Symposium which will take place in April 2021. The articles here reflect on the history of Howard's second experiment and its journey from Garden City to New Town, and consider its relevance to creating new places today.

This article sets the scene by exploring both the deep-rooted moral philosophy upon which Welwyn Garden City was founded and its implications for modern towns and cities.

This exploration has to be set in the context of the grave challenges which confront our society today. Some of these challenges Howard would have recognised easily: 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 people's occupations redundant. But our present is defined by other pressing problems – from racial inequality and climate change to a broken housing delivery model – which require urgent answers if we are to achieve the goal of 'peaceful coexistence'. In sketching an answer to these challenges, we propose that the combination of moral philosophy and practical action embodied in Howard's approach remains our best hope in planning for a resilient future.

As to whether there is any doubt that Howard was interested in this moral question, it is worth reflecting on the eloquence of his argument at the end of chapter 12 of *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, which powerfully advocates an end to poverty and inequality:

*'the true path of reform, once discovered, will, if resolutely followed, lead society on to a far higher destiny than it has ever yet ventured to dare for.'*¹

Howard's solution was essentially in three parts. The first was his now iconic design of the Garden City, and wider Social City, as the physical expression of a rational and just environment – an ambition which was initially realised in practice through the collaboration of Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker. The second was a unique approach to dealing with the values generated by the development of land. The mechanisms and benefits of this approach, when combined with his advocacy of the co-operative movement, were a different kind of local economy. The third and final element, inspired by the anarchism of Kropotkin, was his interest in self-government. The Garden City was to have strong democratic governance, independent of the approval of central government. When thinking about the future of towns and cities, we have to imagine how these elements might play out.

In attempting to sketch the relevance of these three elements, which together deliver on the moral ambition of the Garden City movement, it is important to be clear that these ideas do not and never did apply only to the creation of new places. Even while Howard was enthused about the construction of a network of Garden Cities, he recognised, in chapter 13 of *To-morrow*, that this would create opportunities for the renewal of existing places. In thinking about a moral philosophy of planning for the

future, we assume here that it applies with equal force to both the making and re-making of places.

Places designed for justice

We know what the unjust city looks like. It is all around us; from overt racial segregation in some North American cities to the way that British cities increasingly reflect deep economic and racial inequality. Towns and cities are the product of their political economy, and people without buying power are condemned to live in places with the least green space, the highest pollution, and the poorest-quality homes.

It follows that a socially just city provides access to the components of healthy and fulfilling lives, regardless of people's income. This means ensuring that our towns and cities are walkable, pollution-free places offering a full range of accessible social services and access to art and nature. It requires minimum housing standards that ensure everyone enjoys sufficient space to support their health, wellbeing, learning, and play. The planning and design of this just city can help to resolve what many regard as an intractable problem of wealth redistribution. The creation of a socially rented home built to the highest standards and a tenure-blind design amounts to the single biggest act of wealth redistribution alongside the single biggest contribution to the residents' life chances, health, and wellbeing. A high-quality home is also one of the biggest drivers of people's sense of security, and the foundation of greater social cohesion.

Designing for a just city requires the application of the Garden City Principles in full.

Democratic places

People's voices have to be at the heart of how we organise and manage places. Change, whether in the creation of new places or through programmes of regeneration, has to be co-created with communities, not imposed upon them. There are multiple ways to achieve this, and the democratic ambition of the Garden City is boundless. It is concerned not just with the design of places but with their development and management through community-led housing such as self-build or housing co-operatives. This ambition sees citizens not simply as consumers of services but as active participants in helping to manage and control land, parks and community facilities; it seeks to encourage active political participation in the future direction of places, not just through representative democracy but through mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies.

Places with a mutualised economy

Howard's vision of mutualising the values arising from the development of land was an elegant and ingenious way of paying for utopia. The Garden City



'Live in the sun at Welwyn Garden City' - an early marketing campaign poster for the then new Garden City, taken from *The Art of Building a Garden City: Designing New Communities for the 21st Century*, by Kate Henderson, Katy Lock and Hugh Ellis (RIBA Publishing, 2017)

model is about sharing land value uplift – but also about local control of the economy. Land in common use in the Garden City should also be in common ownership. The idea of a 'foundational economy' – where all the key services we need for the good life are controlled locally – is now mainstream; but the Garden City would go further, ensuring that mutualism is the defining feature of the way we provide homes, utilities, transport, and food. There would be no prohibition on the market, but, in those areas crucial to the Garden City, decisions would be taken locally and profits would be returned to benefit the citizen.

In practice, this is simply much more in line with European ways of running towns and cities – and, on the whole, they work much better than Britain's. Through housing, food and energy co-operatives, municipal enterprise and local procurement, there would be a mixed economy, but with essential

control in the hands of communities. It is clear that there is no place for the absentee landlord or the land speculator in the moral philosophy of the Garden City. The Garden City is not a place that will tolerate anti-social businesses or the extraction of profits which had been created and belong to the wider community.

In combination these ideas can help us to prepare for the kind of future that is desperately needed. Change has become not only desirable in the wake of a global pandemic, but a necessity in the face of global forces such as climate change. How does this translate to a framework for creating new places? Are modern Garden City Principles the right vehicle for this?

As the organisation that has led the charge for a new generation of Garden Cities, the TCPA would be the first to admit that we still have very far to go to

realise these ideas in practice. The renewed interest in the Garden City idea over the past decade should have been the catalyst for change. A set of Garden City Principles, referenced in national policy, provided a policy-friendly definition of the Garden City idea for those places keen to deliver something better for their local community. But while the enthusiasm of some individual officers, elected members and even policy-makers for the *real* Garden City idea has been genuine, and some places have made a real commitment to high standards and stewardship, the failure of government at all levels to adopt the three core pillars of the philosophy that underpin the Garden City idea has been the biggest challenge in achieving real change. It has led to the creation of places that are a lifetime away from the Garden City model outlined in Howard's *To-morrow*.

Many of recent large-scale new development initiatives hint at creating just and democratic places but are operating within a housing delivery model which makes that almost impossible for all but the wealthiest and bravest authorities and housebuilders. The result has sometimes been a complete misrepresentation of the Garden City idea. This has often distilled itself into a narrative distracted by architecture and tree-lined streets. There is no doubt that these elements made the idea attractive and acceptable in policy terms for a century of politicians; but without an underpinning of justice and democracy the very objectives that the Garden City model aims to achieve are undermined.

But there is, nevertheless, some reasons for hope. There is a growing realisation that combining the best of town and country – from walkable neighbourhoods to access to nature – can have real benefits for health and wellbeing. 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, not use the Garden City idea as cover for low-density, car-based development or as a marketing approach for volume housebuilders.

And the concept of long-term stewardship has, partly through necessity, become the element of the Garden City ideal that is perhaps most likely to have continued resonance. Welwyn's story demonstrates the vulnerability of the stewardship role once it is no longer in control of the people. Welwyn Garden City Company's directors had already abandoned their commitment to community benefit returns when government took over Welwyn's development as a New Town; and the assets were stripped once the New Towns programme was wound up. Long-term asset stewardship was the area of greatest failure of the New Towns programme, and one from which we have the most to learn.

From where we stand now, the achievement of new places based on justice, democracy and equality

seems like an immensely difficult journey. There is no doubt that change is desirable, but it is also a *necessity*. If society is to have a secure future it has to have in place a philosophy that is founded on equality, and not one that reinforces social division. A true Garden City would be a powerful contributor to a new sense of social cohesion, reinforced by a vision of governance that enables and demands an active citizenship. All of this rests on the evolution of our economy to support and not undermine people's health, wellbeing and opportunities.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, all these ideas have been practically realised in one form or another and could be applied again now if we had the will to implement them. Whether we make these desirable changes happen or not is in our hands, but, without such a vision, change – and not necessarily for the better – will be forced upon us, particularly by the impacts of climate change. There is no successful way to improvise solutions to one of the planet's greatest challenges. It requires long-term rational and humane planning.

So how do we make this happen? Ebenezer Howard's ability to make his vision a practical reality was founded partly on his personal tenacity. His genius lay in drawing existing ideas into a logical relationship, making a powerful story about a different and better way of living, and then gaining support for the Garden City ideal. As we celebrate the centenary of Welwyn Garden City, and approach the 125th anniversary of the publication of *To-morrow*, now is the perfect time to take a collaborative approach to making these ideas a reality.

The TCPA is starting a two-year conversation, comprising a collaborative programme of projects, events and interventions, to provide a practical framework to realise these ideas. We may find that this requires such a fundamental re-organisation of society – from our broken development model to our democratic systems – that it seems impossible. But what is the alternative? Can we afford to allow existing systems to perpetuate, creating ever more unjust places? Just as Howard did in 1898, we have a responsibility to attempt to set out both what that framework would look like and the practical steps to make it a reality. We look forward to discussing these issues with you at the International Garden Cities Symposium in 2021.

● **Hugh Ellis** is Director of Policy and **Katy Lock** is Director, Communities & Project Delivery (FJ Osborn Fellow) at the TCPA. The views expressed are personal.

Note

- 1 E Howard: *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Swann Sonnenschein, 1898, p.117 (reprinted, with commentary by Peter Hall, Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward, by Routledge, 2003)