

Revisiting Hampstead Garden Suburb: A (Cautionary) Tale of Spatial Determinism

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Hampstead Garden Suburb has become an example of how a social agenda had initiated a new settlement and eventually had disappeared to yield an empty shell with tree-lined streets and picturesque image. Due to the similarities between the garden suburb concept and the new urbanist ideals, the story of Hampstead Garden Suburb is discussed as a cautionary one, despite the remarkable accomplishments of the individuals involved in its development.

A spring walk in Hampstead Garden Suburb last spring suggested resilience of a concept that is rooted in the late 19th century. It was the garden city concept, which initiated first semi-garden cities and then garden suburbs; a concept that found ample application through the first and second generations of new towns in the UK. Overlapping practices with another tradition, the city beautiful movement, played an important role in shaping the visual attributes of the concept.

Although Hampstead Garden Suburb is neither the first nor the largest one of the garden suburbs, we find it exemplary in terms of its transformation over the years. Rather than the original garden city concept or the new town interpretation, it was the garden suburb concept that was found profitable over the decades since. Although increasingly popularized recent revisits to garden suburb practices (which also present a model of suburban development) have taken a new name (i.e. New Urbanism), the resemblance is overwhelming.

Both garden suburb and New Urbanism aspire to provide remedies for social problems by applying (or claiming to have applied) certain spatial principles, such as picturesque images, strict control on design, physical distance from crowded cities, a degree of mixed use, and diverse housing for a heterogeneous population of residents. The fact that Hampstead Garden Suburb has become one of the most expensive neighborhoods in London despite the original intension of providing housing for all, especially for working class, supports the critiques (e.g. Harvey, 1997), who find the spatial determinism embedded in new urbanism naïve and useless.

The story of Hampstead Garden Suburb is therefore a cautionary one, which has to be seen in light of the recent discussions on New Urbanism. In the following sections, we briefly discuss the garden city concept and the city beautiful movement in relation to the roots of the garden suburb concept. Following the historical account of how Hampstead Garden Suburb came about, we summarize the

principles of New Urbanism to point out its resemblance to the implementation of garden city and city beautiful concepts in garden suburbs.

Garden city

Garden city concept was launched when Ebenezer Howard published a detailed urban model in “Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform” in 1898, and soon after in “Garden Cities of Tomorrow” in 1902. His suggestion was to build satellite cities with open space and sunlight as an alternative to the existing crowded cities of the time (Rowe, 1993; Benevolo, 1960; Tafuri and Dal Co, 1976; Kaplan, 1973; Jacobs, 1961). Different from the earlier examples of a similar idea (i.e. employer housing), however, these satellite cities were imagined to be self-sufficient. It was the agricultural beltline and the factories of leading industrialists (to be moved there upon being convinced), which would provide the self-sufficiency of around 32000 residents of a garden city (Rowe, 1993, Benevolo, 1960, Hall, 2005) – although both the town and the agricultural belt were to be permanently controlled by the public authority under which the town was developed (Jacobs, 1961). Howard’s ideas, in essence, constituted a social program rather than a prescription on “how to” design self-sufficient, picturesque towns.



Figure 1. Letchworth's central plaza today: welcoming scenic linear axes, surrounded by civic buildings (Photo: U. Toker).

Howard's ideas found implementation first in Letchworth in 1904, and soon after in Welwyn. Here, it is important to underline the difference between the idea and its looks. The implementation in Letchworth was for the most part true to Howard's ideas of social organization and physical distribution (despite the fact that it was perceived by the press as a weekenders' paradise, a "darling wee, little place" for middle-class ladies) (Hall, 2005). However, the image of picturesque, low-density, green medieval country village was conceived by the architects, Raymond Unwin and his partner R. Barry Parker (Rowe, 1993, Benevolo, 1960, Tafuri and Dal Co, 1976, Hall, 2005). Following Letchworth, the interpretation in Welwyn became the first of many to forego the principle of self-sufficiency (Benevolo, 1960) and therefore the landmark ideal of Howard's social agenda (Hall, 2005). Unwin and Parker's relationship with Edward Lutyens, a key figure in the City Beautiful movement, reveals much about the sources of this interpretation.

Dwelling on aesthetics, Camillo Sitte was largely responsible for the city beautiful movement, which criticized the planning practices of the nineteenth century for putting technical issues forward. Monotony, excessive regularity and symmetry were the results of such practices. According to Sitte "art and utility were mutually exclusive" (Benevolo, 1960: 349). In order to understand old communities' principles of design, he advocated studying old communities, especially medieval towns for their irregular and picturesque character. He believed that the square was an important element of a city, which was a visual entity derived from the relationship between solids and voids (Jackson, 1985). The city beautiful movement was criticized mainly for being Center Monumental, building civic centers or cultural centers that were complete units and never became a part of the city (Jacobs, 1961). However, Hampstead Garden Suburb's and other garden cities' molding owed much to these ideals.

Hampstead Garden Suburb

The initial steps for Hampstead Garden Suburb were taken by Henrietta Barnett, whose sole purpose was to "spread the contagion of refinement to working class life and housing" (Miller, 1992: 80). More particularly, based on her work with her husband, the Vicar of St. Jude's in Whitechapel, in the middle of the worst East End slums of London, Henrietta Barnett was determined to provide spiritual guidance for the poor and strongly believed that overcrowded housing was undermining those efforts (Miller, 1992). Soon after she learned about the plans to extend the London Underground railway to Hampstead – where the Barnetts had a weekend house – in 1903 she mobilized the Heath Extension Council

to purchase 80 acres for a permanent open space and the remaining 243 acres for development of housing for the working class (Miller, 1992; Jackson, 1985). She simply preferred the development in Hampstead following the underground railway to be controlled.

The Garden City Association took interest in her proposal, since she referred to the proposed housing development as a garden suburb, probably to exploit the publicity of the first garden city, Letchworth. In May 1904, Henrietta Barnett brought eight relatively "important" people together as a Steering Trust to work in coordination with the Heath Extension Council (Miller, 1992). The Barnetts had mistrust for local authority housing and found it "too easy and too cheap a remedy" (Jackson, 1985: 83). Also, the local authority showed no interest in this proposal (Miller, 1992). Unwin was hired to materialize Henrietta Barnett's dreams (Miller, 1992). Although Raymond Unwin strongly criticized suburbs (Hall, 2005) and had his own dreams, these obviously were not at odds with Henrietta Barnett's – at least in appearance. In essence, Hampstead Garden Suburb was a compromise of the Garden City ideals and an endorsement of suburban sprawl. However, Unwin, realizing the visual potential of the Heath and cottages of various sizes, chose to focus on the aspects of the scheme which were parallel to the Garden City ideals (Miller, 1992). Rather than the Garden City ideals, however, Henrietta Barnett was interested in replacing the slums with village living where all classes live in harmony and in abundance of space and beauty (Jackson, 1985).



Figure 2. Unwin's eclectic physical expression in houses on an organic layout in Hampstead Garden Suburb (Photo: U. Toker).

One aspect they seemed to agree was to bring a range of income groups together in Hampstead Garden Suburb. This was to happen by renting more expensive, larger and better-located houses to higher income groups and using the profit to compensate for amenities of the lower income groups, more particularly working classes (Miller, 1992; Jackson, 1985). Unwin's belief that all income groups should reside in attractive houses was certainly satisfied in this way.

In terms of site planning, Unwin abandoned the central framework of Letchworth and adapted a loose approach with non-linear tree-lined roads among groups of cottages (Miller, 1992). In order to implement the unusual layout for the time, the first British town-planning legislation had to be passed: Hampstead Garden Suburb Act 1906, because of which narrower roads and cul-de-sacs became possible in addition to alterations in density requirements (Miller, 1992; Jackson, 1985). The overall pedestrian oriented layout was provided with the help of this act.

Another dimension was soon introduced when Edward Lutyens, whose association with the city beautiful tradition was well established by that time, was hired as a consultant (Miller, 1992). Due to Unwin's own interest in the city beautiful tradition, Unwin and Lutyens worked in harmony (Jackson, 1985). In the final plan, Lutyens' influence was mostly confined to the central Town Square, which was placed on the suburb's highest point at the request of Henrietta Barnett, since it accommodated the church, the chapel and the institute (Hall, 2005; Miller, 1992). The final proposal had something for everyone: a church located on the highest point of the site with an emphasis on it configurationally and



Figure 3. ...and Lutyens welcomes visitors in Unwin's Hampstead Garden Suburb (Photo: Umut Toker).

visual centrality for Barnett, a central square with public buildings (the church and a school named after Ms. Barnett) and axial arrangements leading to it for Lutyens, and a medieval, organic layout surrounding all this for Unwin.

The high standard of architecture and firm design-control policy exercised through the Trust were notable characteristics of the Hampstead Garden Suburb. The Suburb was praised for its achievement of the English domestic revival in its eclectic visual expression (Miller, 1992). It was also seen as a viable solution for extending big cities by the proponents of the city beautiful tradition (Jackson, 1985). However, the emphasis on design and the high quality of architecture obscured Henrietta Barnett's social purpose and subverted her original intentions (Miller, 1992; Jackson, 1985). Unwin's intention of creating aesthetic quality in housing was so exaggerated that it became an obstacle in creating housing for all (Jackson, 1985). By 1936, it was admitted that Hampstead Garden Suburb could not meet its original social objectives (Miller, 1992). Hampstead Garden Suburb also failed to fulfill the expectations of the Garden City movement and served as a model for the easier suburban option (Miller, 1992).

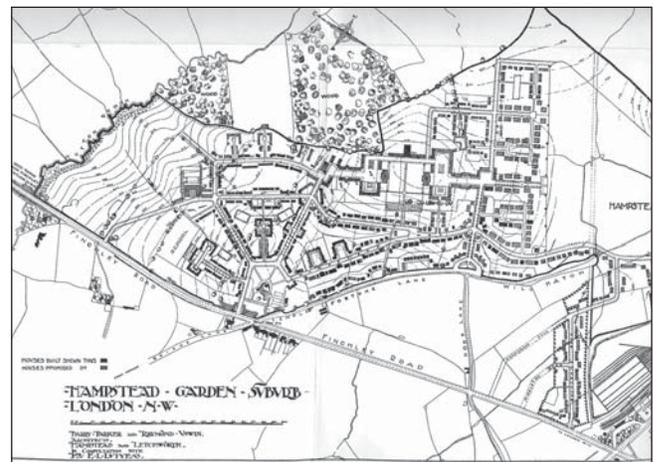


Figure 4. Hampstead Garden Suburb: Plan (Source: Unwin, 1971).

By the time Raymond Unwin published his book, "Town Planning in Practice" in 1909, his Hampstead Garden Suburb of 1905-1907 had already become the way garden city concept was perceived and implemented with its elegant layout of roads, uniform buildings, and distributed open spaces, and without the agricultural belt (Rowe, 1993; Benevolo, 1960). Then, suburban physical qualities and small town social qualities of the garden cities' popularized version provided the foundation for new towns (Burnett, 1978; Jacobs, 1961).



Figure 5. Two faces many are familiar with from New Urbanist settlements: left, a gazebo from Hampstead Garden Suburb, right, a gazebo from Letchworth (Photos: Umut Toker).

Shortly before the Second World War, in order to overcome the housing shortage, public authorities began to provide housing on any available site, which could be acquired without worrying about the problems of slum clearance and redevelopment of the central areas (Rowe, 1993). The most influential policy was the generation of new towns, which were mostly directly provided by the central government in the beginning and by the local authorities in the following applications, as satellite cities in order to decentralize the industry (Benevolo, 1960). Nevertheless, the production level of housing significantly decreased quickly due to the war. The number of houses and flats built in 1938 was 350,000, while it became 7,000 in 1944, right before the end of the Second World War (Russell, 1981). Initially the idea was generated as an emergency measure before the Second World War for London due to the high concentration of industry. However, after the Town Planning Act of 1947, new towns became the norm in the whole country under ordinary circumstances. By 1954 about half the population anticipated for the seven new towns around London had been settled into them (Benevolo, 1960). New towns turned out to be large and fully equipped suburbs (Tafari and Del Co, 1976).

What followed after this was even more interesting in Hampstead Garden Suburb. The gradual shift from a rental scheme to a for-sale scheme resulted in the change of tenure, which eventually led to a change in the social structure of the area. In 1971, 58% of all houses in the Garden Suburb were owner occupied (Shankland Cox, 1971). In 2002, the average price of a detached house in the Garden Suburb was £1,399,620, almost seven times higher than the average price of a detached house in England and Wales (£208,435) (UK National Statistics, n.d.).

In support of these statistics, the heartfelt speech of a 40 year resident of the Suburb titled “Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: The survival of a Suburb” also underlines the shift in population and drift from the original social objectives and its influence on daily life (A talk by Ivor Hall at St Jude’s on Open Day 21 September 2003). He claims that during his 40 years in the Suburb, the working classes have disappeared and now, remaining population can be grouped in two: the rich and “the longer standing resident who, apart from the unrealisable value of their modest homes, would hardly claim to be rich” (Hampstead Garden Suburb, n.d.).

Arguments for Caution

The phases in the story of Hampstead Garden Suburb have much in common with the development and implementation of new urbanist ideals. Since we claim this story to be a cautionary one due to its resemblance to new urbanist developments, we would like to point out their problematic similarities.

Interestingly, both new urbanist ideals and the garden city concept start out with a strong concern over creating a new moral order and a new lifestyle. Howard’s social agenda obviously separates the garden city ideal from new urbanism in this respect, however, in the time period from Letchworth to Hampstead Garden Suburb, this social agenda was the first thing to erode, leading the way to a spatial determinism that claims it can create a new way of life and save communities. It is this focus on spatial arrangements and form (i.e. picket fences and gazebos) in new urbanism that leads one to recognize the parallels to the erosion of the social agenda in garden cities and suburbs.

The principles guiding the physical layout and picturesque image, and the compulsory nature of these principles are also similar in garden suburb and new urbanism. New urbanism proposes to build residential communities beyond the edge of metropolitan areas by commercial developers (Torre, 1999). The guiding principles of new urbanism are based on decentralization of urban patterns, where housing, jobs, schools, daily needs, and other activities are accommodated within easy walking distance of each other. Accordingly, communities should have a center that combines commercial, recreational and cultural uses. With an emphasis on pedestrian movement in these decentralized small units, the streets and sidewalks are to be organized to slow down vehicular traffic, encourage bicycle and pedestrian circulation, and make public transportation accessible. For these communities' social composition, diversity of household types, and income and age groups are proposed to be supported in the variety of house types (Torre, 1999; Calthorpe, 1993, 1994; Bressi, 1994; Duany and Plater-Zyberk, 1994; Moule and Ployzoides, 1994; Talen, 1999). In practice, however, new urbanist developments seem to be private, for-profit developments based on single-family houses standing on private lots as their predominant residential type (Torre, 1999; Harvey, 1997).

Although the design principles of two traditions almost a century apart can hardly be expected to echo each other in the literal sense, the fact that both garden suburbs and new urbanist developments aspire to create a small town life in picturesque style just outside of the city with strict control on design is undeniable.

It is no wonder that principles of new urbanism have been criticized for privileging spatial forms over social processes (Fulton, 1996; Sorkin, 1998; Harvey, 1997; Talen, 1999). Harvey (1997) questions the very concept of community as advertised in new urbanist developments. He claims that in such developments instead of actually building communities, image of a small town community is marketed for the affluent residents. Due to the spatial determinism embedded in new urbanism, which assumes that proper design will "save" American cities and provide a new moral order, the neighborhood becomes equivalent to the community in new urbanism (Harvey, 1997).

Just as garden suburbs had become a model for suburbanization, new urbanism presents a similar threat of becoming part of suburbanization without much difference partly due to its emphasis on similar principles.

Conclusion

Today Hampstead Garden Suburb has become a pleasant-looking, quiet neighborhood full of expensive cars parked on tree-lined streets and cul-de-sacs, through which pedestrian access is provided to large green areas and tennis courts. Coming out of the underground station, one feels the abundance of beauty and space in the Suburb, which is now in the middle of ever so crowded and polluted London. Consequently, one question remains unavoidable: Considering the pleasantness of this neighborhood today, how cautionary its tale can be?

Here, we would like to point out the fact that this pleasant experience of living in Hampstead Garden Suburb is a privilege available to the rich, and occasionally even to the royalty. It is the loss of social agenda what makes the tale of the Suburb cautionary. It is also the role of overemphasis on design in obscuring the social agenda what makes the present pleasantness of the Suburb irrelevant. It is the increasing popularity of new urbanism and its parallels to garden suburb what makes us point out the importance of social agenda and the potential problems of spatial determinism. It is the emphasis on "picket fences and gazebos" in new urbanism what makes the tale of the Suburb cautionary for us a century after its conception.

Hampstead Garden Suburb is exemplary in this discussion both because it has changed so much demographically and because it has remained almost the same physically. We believe that this aspect of the Suburb undermines the arguments favoring spatial determinism. Unwin, Lutyens and many other architects who worked in the Suburb have created a physical environment, which prevailed in terms of durability and pleasantness but failed to "save" the slum residents or "improve" the living conditions of the working class. However, we also concur with many critiques of spatial determinism that such expectations from mere physical design is unrealistic. Therefore, our purpose is not to undervalue the remarkable work of these architects. It is rather to point out the fact that their remarkable work has become another ring in the chain of suburbanization due to the loss of original social agenda which was embedded in the Hampstead Garden Suburb project in the beginning and which was the sole motivation of Henrietta Barnett.

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