

Deconstructing Howard through the Lens of Hall: Lessons from the Garden City Reformer.

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In this provocative essay, William Riggs discusses the lasting legacy of Ebenezer Howard's and Sir Peter Hall's work and who it challenges us to think our solutions and deal with familiar issues like protecting green belts, equitable jobs and housing. The author notes that the resurgence of a stronger focus on physical design and the sustainability and eco-towns movements will help us move towards a Howard-inspired "Peaceful Path to Real Reform".

The work of reformer Ebenezer Howard had a specific and lasting vision on city design, the legacies of which we see today. Like many planners today, Howard was deeply concerned about social issues and problems and saw the design of a good city as a way to correct this. He outlined a city, and explained how it could expand growing cluster by cluster, in little pods connected by the railways, yet maintaining the same concordance with city/country feel by making sure to insert rings of green space within the growing clusters and preserve the countryside. He favored a design that used a series of rings attached by radials that would unite “the factories, warehouses, dairies, markets, coal yards, timber yards” on the outer ring of the town with the elegant garden and crystal palace in the center (Howard, 1965, p. 55).

These principles still resonate today, to a large degree shaped by those such as Peter Hall and his book *Cities of Tomorrow* (1996). Hall reinforces the trajectory of Howard's vision, how it was “sustainable” and “green,” but also how it connected to the historic development of cities. The smoke from the city would be kept down through the use of all-electric machines for industry and inter-town travel limited mainly to rail. The trash would be “utilized on the agricultural portions of the estate” limiting waste that would be generated and providing an additional resource for farmer fertilization (Howard, 1902, p. 55). Large green belts would be preserved for agricultural production and to draw from the advantages of the

country environment as well as the benefits of the town. This article deconstructs the lessons of Howard through the contextual lens that Hall provides. It focuses on tacit lessons urban planners and policy makers might realize today and integrate into their own thinking or practice. The also provides reminders of key design lessons and principles that still resonate when we look at our most desired spaces and places. These include a focus on design, behavior, social and economic change—things that planners can consider in projects that they work on every day.

Focusing on Design

On the simplistic level of physical design, Howard's series of bent rectangles to subdivide plots that radiated from the center of town is a common theme today. While Howard may have borrowed plans for a city center with a strict grid formation and divided by two crossing radials from colonial planners such as Sharp, he implemented them in a way that took advantage of green space and encouraged efficient transportation while navigating the of the grid layout of modern towns (Sharp, 1794). In cities such as Louisville, KY with Bardstown Road, and Oakland, CA with Telegraph Avenue, they can be the create unique architectural features because of the way they dissect lots. Many buildings end up with oddly shaped triangular backs as they attempt to fit storefronts onto these oddly shaped lots.

We also see Howard's themes evidenced today in our formulation of parks, streets, developments and new sustainable “eco-towns” across the globe. In parkways such as those in Louisville, KY and Riverside, IL we see radial streets surrounded by green space. The agricultural green belt and many of

Dedicated to Sir Peter Hall who challenged me to become not only a planner thinker but to be a thinking planner.

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Figure 3: Partial view of Dongtan in Chongming Island, China, a master plan by Arup Associates. Three villages are set to meet in a city center, and the delicate existing wetlands were a driving factor in the design. (source: <http://www.futurarc.com/index.cfm/projects/projects-2008/2008-3q-dongtan-eco-city/>)

the absence of poverty and a virtually classless society.

This fact, however, discounts years of behavioral research that does show that the environment does impact behavior and even physical health. For example, studies have shown a decrease in mental stress when viewing green space vs. a dense urban scene (Ulrich, 1984). Others show increased health impacts from interaction with Nature (source). We can also see examples of behavior through daily life, such as how an individual acts when in a church vs. a sporting arena, and how thus many schools have begun requiring a standard, professional dress code to bring equitability to the learning environment. Even two of the most recent planning movements, New Urbanism and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), ascribe to the thought that city form does truly matter, and impacts behavior. So, although class equity may play a role in the likelihood of crime, one cannot simply discount the impact of the physical environment.

One can also not discount Howard's intention – which was to reframe the social construct and work to eliminate poverty through social reform. He envisioned a utopian world where there was a place for every person and every profession in the “marriage” of the benefits of the town and the benefits of the country (Howard, 1965, p. 48). These ideas have the same basis that we ascribed to in the Urban Revival and Advocacy movements in the 1960s and 1970s.

Social and Economic Reform

But what about this concept of reform; who was to say that society, needed reform or wanted it for that matter; and in

curing the “morals” of those in society, why were the morals of the country seen as the cure to the ills of the city? Yes, Howard did desire to cure the “morals” of society and bring the benefits that he saw from the country and agrarian life to the city. However, this was the predominant view of the time. Jacob Riis and other social reformers fought to clean up many of the results of cramped and unhealthy conditions in the city. The Garden City added the element that was many of these cramped early cities were missing – the concept of any amount of open space. This idea is not unlike the romantic view many Americans have today in the glorification and financial subsidy of rural life and agrarian communities – despite the fact that many of these communities are financially and environmentally unsustainable. Many humans see it as one of the purest (and therefore more moral) lifestyles, yet Howard recognized there were disadvantages to the country and that it had its own disadvantages and problems with poverty and lack of opportunity. His solution was the combination of town and country.

But this town-country “solution” is not perfect. It has some weaknesses. Many would argue that the Garden City has no applicability today; that even at its' origination it was wholly flawed. It is true that Howard's socialist ideals may have caused to underestimated three main factors in the design of Garden City. These include: (1) the skill set of those who would create his local economy; (2) the use of different transportation modes; and (3) the assumption that his community would be a self-producing or basic/local economy.

First, Howard assumed what one would describe as almost a classless society and that people of many income brackets and skill sets would locate there. Again, this may have been an embodiment of the socialist principles and the positive view of human nature held by many at the time, yet he still assumed that a broad swath of people with varying skills who would have to occupy these new towns. It may have been foolhardy to believe that a concentration of people with such skills from varied social classes would just descend on a new town. We see manifestations of this in Post-War communities that were created by Abercrombie and Unwin, and filled by a population of middle-class suburbanites and troops returning from the war (Hall, 1996, p. 168).

Secondly, Garden City discounted changes in transportation and the concept of the satellite city, suburb, and urban sprawl. Ultimately it took a static view of transportation. Garden Cities may not have been built specifically as the suburbs of large towns, but based on commute patterns and the ease of transportation, they ultimately became nothing more than the bedroom communities. With the advent of the cheaper automobile and the focus on it as the primary mode for intra-

city transit, the train simply became defunct. It could not (and cannot) compete with a device as efficient as a personal auto for individualized point-to-point transportation. This was painstakingly evident in London where Garden Cities that took shape became refuges for the upper and middle-upper class working in London and commuting to Garden City suburbs. This puts even more pressure on protecting the green belts that were a part of Garden City. Especially around London in the Thames Gateway, it has become increasingly hard to preserve as the city grows in breadth and threatens to expand into such protected land.

Lastly, although Howard's desire was to create the perfect city for happiness and health, but economic viability was not in his scope. In his vision, jobs would be located in Garden City, and he outlines both industrial and service sector jobs riddled throughout the city with housing and government functions. For Howard, the town could be virtually self-sufficient and provide for almost all of its needs having manufacturing and agriculture within its bounds, something rarely planned for before when towns had been planned as either one or the other, modern or agrarian. He may have been influenced by the thinking of Marx and Engels because his work embodied altruism to the core. In his mind "the people in their collective capacity own the land on which this beautiful group of cities is built, the public buildings, the churches, the schools and universities, the libraries, picture galleries, theatres" and thus this would be the great equalizer in his commune of pods making it of a "magnificence which no city in the world whose land is in pawn to private individuals can afford."

This simply has not happened. The concept of local economies never materialized, possibly because of the transportation related factor mentioned above. Furthermore, the economic structure of his communities was never realized. The concept of community trust ownership of land is still used but on rare occasions. Both in Europe and the United States, land ownership is seen as an unalienable privilege that cannot be denied. Many people see it as the only true way of amassing wealth. A large portion of land is held by the government, but a socialistic structure in which land is not allocated on a transactional basis was a critical weakness of Howard's vision that may not have been feasible in the real world.

Concluding Remarks

While some of these weaknesses are not wholly unfounded, it is indisputable that Howard's thinking impacted generations of planners and architects, and still provides a pre-eminent vision of a utopian community that we can learn from. With his vision, Howard desired to promote an achievable, social hierarchy of his day that could be obtained without conflict,

and we also see some of that manifested through the historical narratives of Hall. Physical aspects arising from both Howard's and Hall's work are still seen today, their legacy still resonating with all planners. This legacy challenges us to think hard about our solutions, and grapple with tough but familiar issues like protecting green belts, equitable jobs and housing. And these efforts relate exactly to what the subtitled of Howard's book underscored: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform.

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