

# Revolution in the Garden

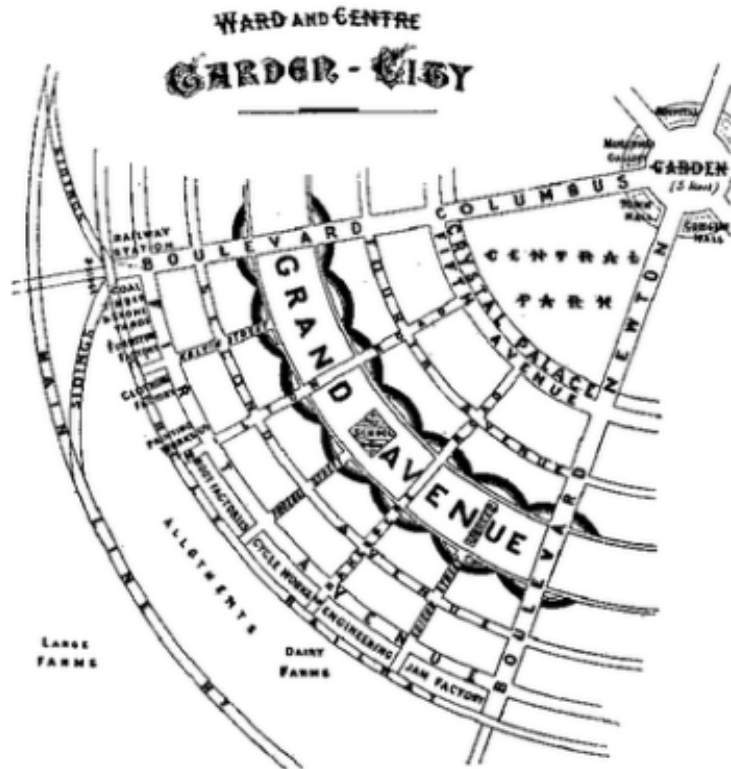
*Garden Cities of To-morrow and Garden Suburbs of Yesterday*

Owen Hatherley



It might seem peculiar to imagine the New Towns or Garden Cities as anything especially revolutionary: places like Letchworth, Welwyn Garden City, Stevenage or Hampstead Garden Suburb are assumed to be staid and dull, their radical history generally forgotten: for many, they might be just another satellite town or suburban outpost. However, these places have a hidden history, one which spans utopian socialism and Victorian philanthropy, Modernism and Medievalism and takes us as far afield as Frankfurt or Magnitogorsk. The very idea of a 'Garden City' might seem merely parochial or conservative, but as the artist Ian Hamilton Finlay once claimed, 'garden centres must become the Jacobin clubs of the new revolution'.

## THE GARDEN CITY OF THE FUTURE



From Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (1902)

This is a story that could start with Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. Alongside a paean to the revolutionary possibilities created by the industrial city and a dismissal of what they call 'rural idiocy' is the demand for the progressive elimination of the antithesis between city and country. Or alternatively it could start with the plans for small, self-contained, electric-powered autonomous communities advocated by the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin. However we'll begin instead with the work of Ebenezer Howard.

In 1898 Howard, a stenographer at the Houses of Parliament who regarded himself in his spare time as something of an inventor 'invented' the garden city in his book *To-morrow, a Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, which he republished 4 years later as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. This book was typical of a certain kind of Victorian reformism in that it suggested one overwhelming idea as the solution to all the country's ills. He outlines the overcrowding, dirt, disease and poverty of the city, the monotony of the suburbs and the isolation of the countryside and offers a solution that seems too simple to be true – to build new cities which contain the country within them. This would of necessity attract people from the city – at which point the country could re-enter the city, with the slums replaced by parks and gardens.



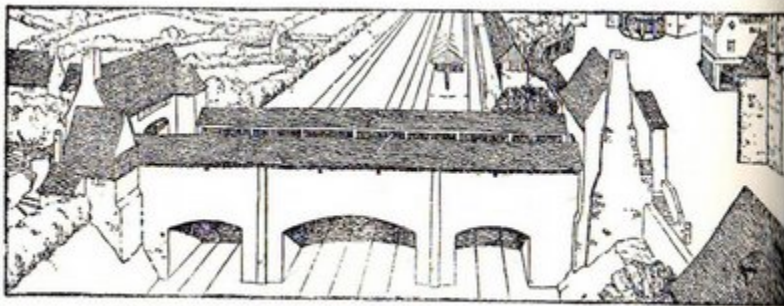


*Illus. 97.—An imaginary irregular town.*

From *Town Planning in Practice* (1908), Raymond Unwin

But what really marks Howard out from Morris, or other utopian socialists such as Robert Owen, who had organised their own communes and communities, was the realism and practicality of his book. Howard had done his maths, and set down precisely in his book how much it would cost for people to band together and purchase an area of land for the experiment, and how much the city would cost to run and maintain. The Garden City itself would be the sole landlord, essentially meaning the entire city would be owned in common. However Howard wasn't quite a Communist – he tried, in typical late-Victorian style, to fuse Socialism and Individualism, and he had a laudable refusal to wait for the revolution for change. He notes that socialists have a tendency to criticise any attempts at creating what he calls 'new forms' within the old, unjust system. For Howard, the obvious justness of the Garden City would be its own argument for what he characteristically called 'commonsense socialism'.

## THE GARDEN CITY IN REALITY - LETCHWORTH



*Illus. 118.—Suggested Railway Bridge for Letchworth, Garden City.*

From *Town Planning in Practice*

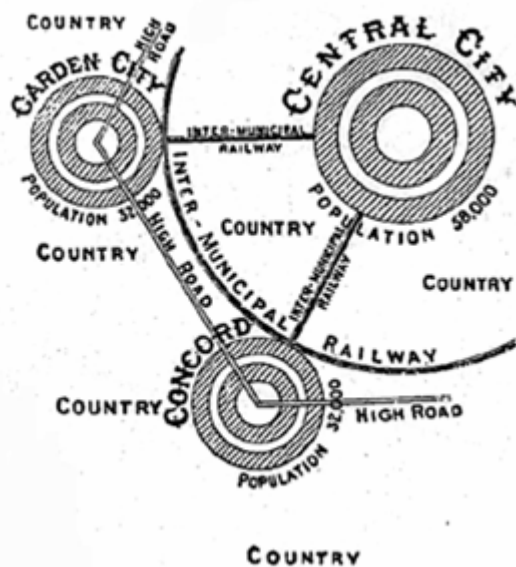
For all Howard's practicality, he had been rather naïve in assuming that people inspired by the justness of the garden city would just band together and raise the capital themselves. He was right, however, that the idea's simplicity would quickly inspire emulation, and a Garden City Association was formed in 1901. This would be bankrolled by the Quaker philanthropists of the Cadbury family and the Lever company, both of whom had built precursors to the Garden City for their workers at Bournville near Birmingham and at Port Sunlight near Merseyside, and had as its main spokesmen a coalition of liberal MPs and reformist socialists like George Bernard Shaw. Shaw, who was charmed by Howard's normality and diffidence, dubbed him 'Ebenezer, the Garden City geyser'. In 1903 they settled on Letchworth in Hertfordshire as the site for their experiment.

They chose for the architect and planner of the city Raymond Unwin. Unwin is an interesting figure. Under the influence of William Morris, he was a member of the Socialist League. Despite Morris' medievalism, the Socialist League was actually a serious, Marxist organisation dedicated to capitalism's violent overthrow, so one of its number seems a strange choice for this group of reformers and philanthropists. As well as his theoretical commitment to class war, another thing marked Unwin out from Ebenezer Howard- his medievalism.



Letchworth

Like Morris, Unwin essentially saw the socialist future city as a sort of idealised 14th century market town. His book *Town Planning in Practice* has several pretty lithographs showing walled medieval towns as exemplars of true city planning. There would be no crystal palaces in Unwin's garden city. His attempts to hide the technological innovations of the 19th century can at times be rather comic: look here at this Railway Bridge proposed for Letchworth, which tries to look like anything other than piece of industry. Unwin and his partner Barry Parker developed a style based on steeply pitched roofs, a lack of ornament, generous gardens and open space, of course, and a tight plan designed to encourage social interaction. Accordingly there would be much enclosed space and courtyards - a typical Letchworth street, would have no hedges to spur on neighbourliness. Howard of course moved in straight away.

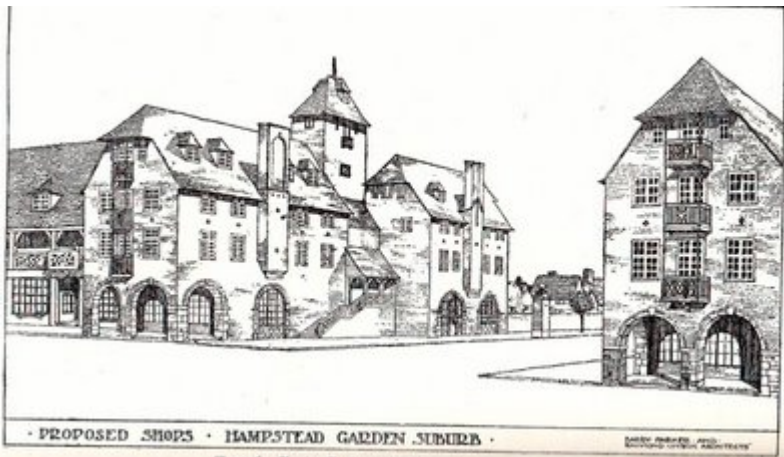


From *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*

Letchworth, although designed to ameliorate class conflict, was very popular with socialists and trade unionists, as well as numerous vegetarians, non-conformists, experimenters and fantasists – its worth noting that HG Wells was an early supporter – who would have free rein to argue for their particular positions in the city's various institutes, which had to be fairly interesting, seeing as the town had no pubs. In this respect Letchworth can seem quite modern in its anticipation of all sorts of life-reform faddishness – a contemporary cartoon shows its 'Food Reform Restaurant and Simple Life Hotel', with its Health Food Store downstairs, which just about says it all. There were still utopian elements to Letchworth, and Howard put much of his energies into Homesgarth, which was a collective courtyard development that functioned as a commune, with no individual kitchens and all food collectively prepared: an experiment that would be repeated 25 years later in the Soviet Union, more of which later.

Of course Letchworth had to pay the bills, so industrialists were encouraged from the start by the promise of cheap labour, seeing as the rents were already tiny by London standards. This would exacerbate the tension between working class socialists and the Fabians and Liberals that they were newly living nearby to: although not next door to, as to encourage tenants who could help pay for their experiment, Unwin and Parker had designed clearly demarcated working class and middle class districts in the new city. In 1912-3 there was a strike wave in Letchworth, and one of its rallying cries was 'we can't live on Fresh Air!' Howard's second Garden City, planned for Welwyn, after the First World War, discarded much of the original utopianism, becoming essentially an unusually green, semi-industrial commuter town, while the architect hired for the job, Louis de Soissons, had none of Unwin's ambitiousness, employing throughout a bland neo-Georgian style.

### **THE GARDEN SUBURB – PERVERSITY IN HAMPSTEAD**

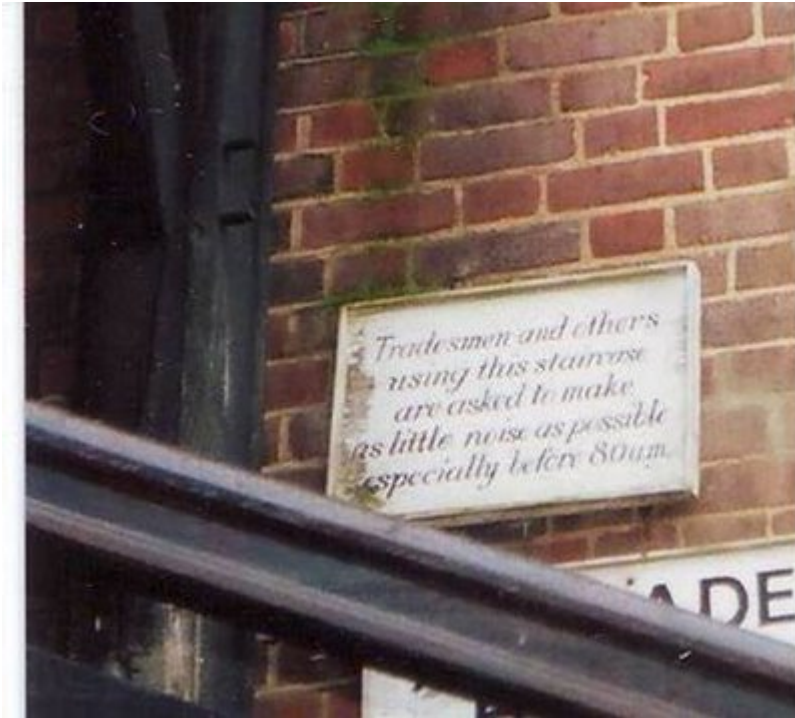


From *Town Planning in Practice*

Unwin, however, had moved on to other projects. In 1907 he was hired by Henrietta Barnett, the patron of Toynbee Hall, an outpost of East End philanthropy, to design a Garden Suburb on the edge of Hampstead Heath. This caused a fair few accusations that they had sold out, seeing as the original point of Ebenezer Howard's book was to attract people out of London. Also, while Letchworth had some measure of democratic control, the new Hampstead Garden Suburb would always be Barnett's autocratic creation – one of Unwin's early maps of the Suburb has her scribbles all over it, indicating where the inhabitants would play and work: 'this is the pond where children will sail their boats and swim' and so forth. However the local councils would fund much of the Garden Suburb, as Hampstead had – much as it does now – a dearth of working class housing.

Although it was bordered on one side by the long, arterial Finchley Road, the Garden Suburb had the heath as its own green belt, and erected a medieval style city wall against the heath to demarcate its boundaries. Unwin's plans were similar to Letchworth, only tighter and more urbane – curiously more city-like in the garden suburb than they were in the garden city. Similarly, the garden suburb was subtly divided by class, although the differences in class between the houses are almost imperceptible if you walk round it now. One of

the hangovers from Unwin's socialism was that commerce was banished to the edge of the suburb, to these rather extravagant shops facing Finchley Road. We're even further here from the crystal palaces of Howard's garden city of the future. However Unwin's more experimental side can be seen in these buildings, the conservatism of his medievalist style giving way to a more fantastic idiom: the critic Iain Nairn was no fan of the suburb on the whole, wrote of them in his brilliant 1965 gazeteer, *Nairn's London* –



*'The Suburb lives either up or down to its reputation, insufferably cosy details allied to a central blankness of imagination which shuffled the shops out to the edges, then refused to build a pub and filled the central square with churches and institutes. But when Sir Raymond Unwin finally got around to recognizing that man had got to satisfy his material needs somewhere, he provided a masterpiece'. These shops have 'a conviction and solidity that the twee private houses lack. Tall hipped gables like crane-hoists tower above the road, and the side elevations are brilliant asymmetrical compositions'.*

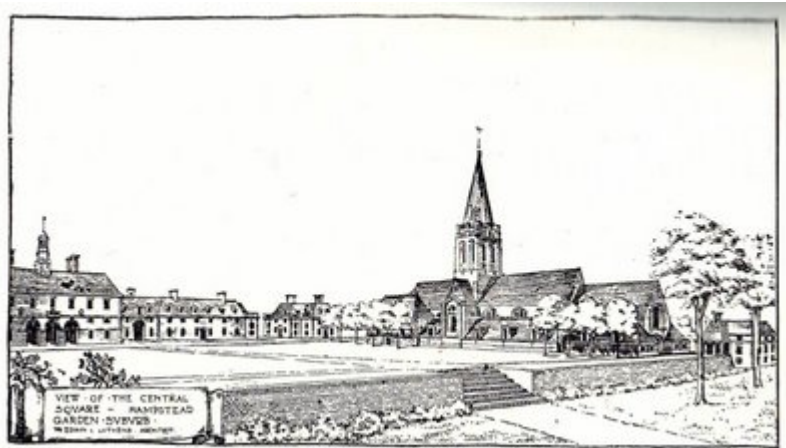
That they were inhabited by workers can be seen in the picture above, where a sign warns tradesmen against ringing doorbells before 8am. Nowadays, ironically enough, one of them is now a Barclays' bank.



Hampstead Garden Suburb's Central Square, 2007

The touch of the peculiar was continued in the suburb's central square, the buildings for which were designed by a young Edwin Lutyens, an urbane, classicising architect rather than an arts-and-craftsist like Unwin. While one might imagine that in 1910 this square was full of heated debate and fevered plans for a new society, but it now seems a rather desolate, uncanny place. An ordered section of grassland and trees, it has at east and west a pair of churches, and an institute at the front: which, as you can see, seems fantastically deserted. This starts to become actively quite disturbing when you look at the two churches. One of them has an unnervingly steep roof, while the other, St Jude's, which overshadows the entire suburb, has, in another of my dodgy photos, what seems unmistakably to be an upside down cross. Nairn again, manages to capture the strange combination of parochial, picturesque insularity and genuine otherness that characterises the place:

*'Full of coy perverseness which ruins the inside and makes the outside unbearably giggly – 'look at me, I'm mixing classical and Gothic, look at me'. You want to give Sir Edwin's precocious bottom a good clout. Yet out of it all, this puzzling child produced a magnificent steeple, building up strong and sure through the belfry to an octagonal top and a bulky spire. It stamps the suburb from any angle and any distance; the way in which the styles are subordinated to and sublimated by the total idea of steeple is up to Hawksmoor's level, yet there is no attempt to copy Hawksmoor, no precedent at all. But what about the frippery of the rest? Was it a necessary fetish, like high-heeled leather boots?'*



Illus. 167.—Hampstead Garden Suburb. Sketch showing the arrangement of buildings on the Central Place. Mr. Edwin L. Lutyens, Architect. See Illus. 166.

### From *Town Planning in Practice*

The Hampstead Garden Suburb has long since ceased to be any kind of Workers Paradise, if indeed it ever was: the narrow, winding streets are now full of aggressively huge cars, while on the rare occasions you see someone walking the streets they tend to be elderly Jewish women rather than the proletarian youth saved from the Workhouse who made up part of its original population. Meanwhile Unwin's style became a prototype for the massive suburban expansion of the 1930s, so the enclosed garden suburb is surrounded on all sides by mock-tudor. However just at its borders there are odd little outbreaks of inter-war continental Modernism, like this block here, Belvedere Court, which makes no attempt whatsoever to evoke an idealised medieval past, looking more like something by Erich Mendelsohn. And right in the suburb itself, in one of the playing fields reserved for the tenants, is this flat roofed pavilion. However, this new style has much more in common with the Garden Suburb and the Garden City than one might expect.



Belvedere Court, 1930s

## THE MODERNIST GARDEN CITY – BRUNO TAUT AND ERNST MAY



Bruchfeldstrasse Siedlung, built 1925

The Garden City had perhaps its biggest take-up in Germany, where the arts and crafts movement had less of a problem with modernity, and actually offered its services to industrialists in the Deutscher Werkbund. As with Letchworth, it was an idea fought over by visionary utopian socialists, intent on what they called 'lebensreform' via abolishing the difference between city and country, and more pragmatic businessmen with dreams of a pastoral arcadia that might just produce more productive and less rebellious workers than the 'mietsakerne' or 'rental barracks' popping up all over cities like Berlin. Small garden settlements were designed by radical architects like Bruno Taut in what was initially a mere adaptation of Unwin's style to a country where the resident fairytales were those of the Brothers Grimm rather than the Beatrix Potter tendencies of the English. Interestingly the Berlin Dadaists called for the creation of garden cities in their 1919 manifesto.

However, after the First World War, and in radical contrast to the timidity of Welwyn Garden City, the German planners and architects designed for a new world that would make no more gestures at an idealised peasant past. This really begins with the work in Frankfurt of the town-planner and architect Ernst May. Now May was not only influenced by Raymond Unwin's Garden Cities – he had actually moved to Britain for a time to be trained by Unwin himself, so we might have expected his work to aspire to the dreamlike quaintness of Letchworth or Hampstead. On the contrary. After being appointed planner and city architect to Frankfurt's Social Democratic City Council, he began an unprecedented experiment – one which we could call the Modernist Garden Suburb.

In 1925 May designed, on the outskirts of Frankfurt the Siedlung Bruchfeldstrasse, literally the Bruchfield Street Settlement. This was laid out with landscape gardens, winding streets and plenty of open space, light and air, much as Unwin might have done. The picturesquely pointy roofs though have been sliced off, the chocolate box stucco has been painted with some sort of Mondrian pattern, while rather than using good rustic materials, May

used all manner of shiny, industrial railings and balconies. The central courtyard of the Bruchfeldstrasse estate shows many traces of his English precursors, though takes them somewhere radically futuristic that they would never have dared. While one gets the sense that Unwin was always rather unsure about the 'city' part of Howard's work, May's work is entirely modern and urban.

In Frankfurt May would subsequently design, on the outskirts of the city, thousands of dwellings, all in carefully planned and arranged 'siedlungen', with the cafes and shops missing in Hampstead all in prominent places, along with community centres and schools. There would be a constant element of surprise about them, their angularity broken up by patterns, unexpected layouts and dramatic curves and changes of scale, as in blocks of flats like this one in his Romerstadt Siedlung which plays on ocean-liner imagery. Although these were never garden cities, being connected with the city of Frankfurt, they never became a mere suburban sprawl either.

The architect Bruno Taut, meanwhile, had been experimenting for around a decade with different adaptations of the garden city idea, from Unwin-style workers cottages pre-war that he had painted in expressionist-influenced bright colours, to wild, utopian projects for alpine garden cities that would be constructed entirely of coloured glass, something that makes him perhaps closer to Ebenezer Howard's crystal palaces than Unwin himself ever was. None of these blueprints were ever put into practice, although he was asked by the Trade Union building society GEHAG to design garden settlements in Berlin in the mid 1920s. These followed Ernst May's revolutionising of public housing to an even more radical extent. Like the Frankfurt developments, these didn't have the aspirations for ameliorating class conflict that drove the English garden city: they were public housing, pure and simple.



Ernst May, Romerstadt Siedlung

It would be a decidedly complex simplicity, however. Again we have the landscaped gardens: this is the Hufeisensiedlung, the 'Horseshoe Settlement' in Berlin, where the central court curves around, enclosing a collective garden. Meanwhile, Taut had painted onto the stucco or concrete walls of

these flats colours even more jarringly artificial than May had used in Frankfurt. In these developments the difference between city and country is abolished in a very different way to the English garden city: his 'Waldsiedlung', on the edge of a forest, had in walking distance real, untamed forest as well as landscaped gardens, and yet the houses and flats themselves made no attempt to look rural or rustic: Taut's city in the garden wouldn't lose its urbanity, would keep hold of its urban, modern identity. Famously, in Letchworth people couldn't notice that the town was new, so successful was its work of medieval simulation. However, the original Garden Cities of To-morrow had called for 'new forms' - and here they were.



Bruno Taut, Hufeisensiedlung, 1925

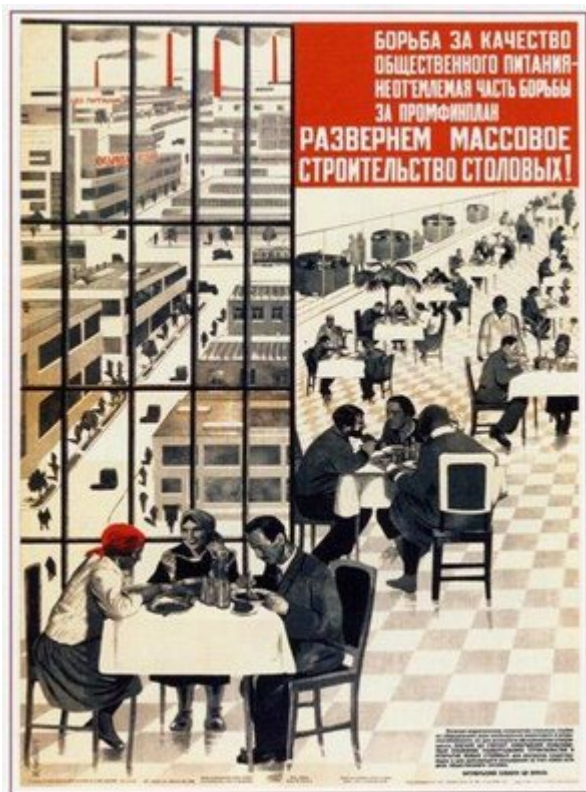
In 1929 Bruno Taut was asked by the British magazine 'the studio' to write an introduction to the Modern Architecture that had made no inroads whatsoever into British cities, let alone planned whole settlements on their outskirts. At this point a property boom was transforming the outskirts of British cities. Pretend-rural mock tudor or Unwinesque mock medieval housing was in fact erasing huge swathes of the countryside outside of London, putting on a country dress for the purpose of its obliteration, all in the name of the dream of an Arcadian England that the Garden Cities had helped to popularise. While he gives his due to Unwin and Howard, he gently mocks the English fear of the modern, which he links to a fear of the collective. I'd like to quote a few passages from Taut's book to give a sense of how his argument works:

'Architecture is freeing itself from the cramping confinement of its old costume, putting the health of its organism before everything else, somewhat in the same way that women have given up tight lacing...The small, individual house, built in accordance with the wishes of an individual man or woman, is possibly still more indicative of the delirium of individualism. The owner has dreamt of their own little house all their lives, and when they do get that far, they are anxious for it to be the most beautiful in the whole world...The construction of a dwelling-house not only shows that the feeling of ownership is not only a menace to its quality, but even to a degree opposed to it. For where the owner-builder is more disposed to waive his possessive rights in

favour of something really good and useful, there will not only disappear the sentimental, romantic delirium, but the houses will come to bear a certain resemblance and suitability, one to the other...only by its collection in a co-operative sense can the dwelling-house avoid this dreary schematicism...collectivism (is the) style forming factor. Leadership has passed to the hands of those who erect buildings...those who can, in short, produce everything that everybody needs, depending each one upon the other – to the hands of the working classes'

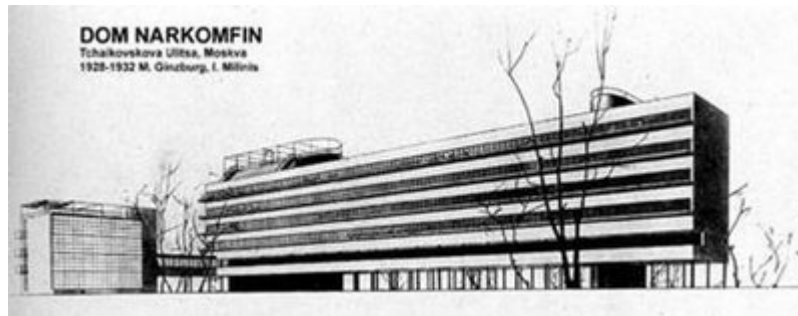
So while, like the planners of the Garden Cities and Suburbs in England, Taut is declaring definitely for socialism, its not a socialism imposed from above by benevolent philanthropists but one created by the workers themselves. But neither he nor Ernst May in Frankfurt had ever quite managed to design in Germany a whole new city from scratch, they had no Letchworth or Welwyn Garden City to their credit. This was about to change.

### **SOTSGOROD – THE SOVIET GARDEN CITIES**



In 1930 Ernst May was asked to design New Towns in the Soviet Union, as was Bruno Taut two years later. The First Five Year Plan for the industrialisation of the country had enabled it to avoid the Great Depression that was then sweeping Europe, while its rejection of Modernism was still a few years off: propaganda posters like this one showed the new cities of socialism in unambiguously Modern terms. Their New Towns, like Magnitogorsk, would take many of the ideas that had been experimented with in Frankfurt and Berlin and employ them on a grander scale, although while the original garden city was the about the city in the garden, here they would

be the city in the factory. All the towns designed by the Germans, the 'sotsgorod' or socialist cities, would be adjuncts to the huge industrial centres that were being created by the country's accelerated industrialisation, leaving many of the original, more utopian plans on the drawing board. However, the Soviet Union had its own schools of thought on the ideal city, which were yet more innovative than the Germans.

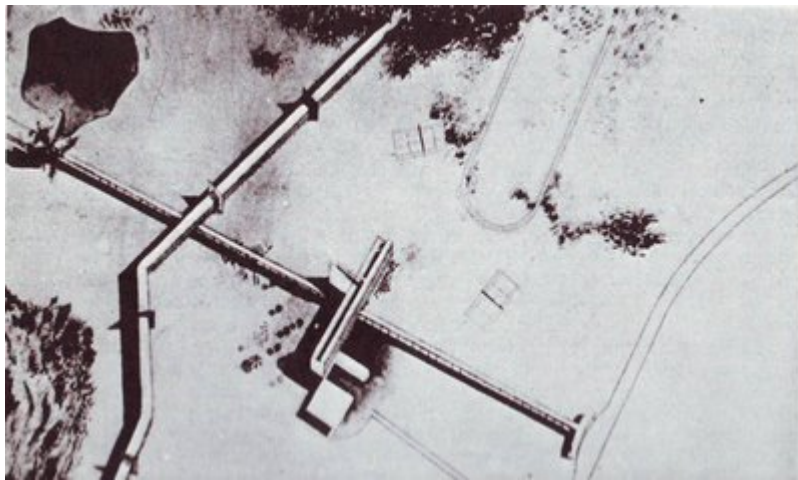


At the time of the First Five Year Plan, the architects of the Constructivist movement had split into two factions about the shape of the socialist city: into a group that called themselves 'urbanists', and another known as 'disurbanists'. The Urbanists took up one of the more idealistic elements of Letchworth and gave it a more technological spin. Ebenezer Howard's brainchild in the town, the collective house at Homesgarth, would become the unacknowledged basis for a new kind of city-block. The most famous prototype for this was built in 1929 in a Moscow Park, the Narkomfin building, designed by Moisei Ginzburg – as in Homesgarth, there were no kitchens, while this glazed part of the block would house a library, gymnasium, laundrette, kitchens and cafes for the tenants. Family life was to be phased out in the Narkomfin and the other 'vertical garden cities' that were supposed to follow it, in favour of the collective rearing of children, leaving men and women to devote themselves to building a new society. The Narkomfin Building – which you can see here as it is now, looking somewhat shabby - was dubbed a 'semi-collectivised house', a step on the way to a full collectivisation that never occurred.

Linking the Urbanists and the Disurbanists were the proposals of Nikolai Milyutin, head of the Commissariat of Finance. Milyutin envisaged the new city as a strip-like 'linear' city linked by public transport where housing akin to the Narkomfin, would be set in public parks: one should remember here Erno Goldfinger's phrase the 'Park City', making the distinction between the private garden and the public park. This parkland would be worked, with agricultural and industrial workers living in the same blocks of flats. Milyutin's linear city or, in his neologism Sotsgorod, or Socialist City, would have no centre, nor the concentric circles that would connect the Garden Cities. One of the supporters of the Linear Sotsgorod, the designer Karel Tiege, wrote of how it might achieve the uniting of city and country. I'm going to quote this passage in full, as it encapsulates beautifully the whole garden city ideal, while trying its best to distance itself from its English precursors. Tiege wrote -

*'In a vertical garden city, the term 'house and garden' is interpreted in a new way, differently than envisioned by the romantics of the English garden city*

*movement. Here, the green open areas between the rows of high houses are not ornate show gardens, nor should they be confused with English type parks. To sum up, we are not dealing with pretentious formal gardens or even with replicas of public city parks, but simply with green areas put at the disposal of people living in the houses nearby, with lawns for their own enjoyment and without formally-laid out gravel paths. Indeed, the cool shade of shrubs and clumps of trees, quiet meadows and woods, pools and sand boxes for children to play in – in short, reservoirs of sunshine and air. As for the flower gardens that surround the private villas – let them become an integral part of the homes themselves. Flowers in window boxes, on balconies and terraces, flowers in winter gardens, clubs and children's homes. The primary function of the garden is to extend the interior space virtually into outside, natural space: well then, let it now physically enter into our homes and merge with their interiors, which in turn extend their space into nature outside. Let us integrate our dwellings with flowers, grass and trees by uniting nature with human-built form.'*



Mikhail Barsch and Moisei Ginzburg, 'Green City', 1930

Another intriguing proposal was made by Konstantin Melnikov, for the 'Green City', a plan for which you can see here, which was based around ensuring plenty of high-quality sleep for its inhabitants: remember the plaque in Hampstead Garden Suburb admonishing any potential noise-makers while the workers were in bed? Well here's the Constructivist version. Melnikov wrote: 'While undertaking to expand the scope of architecture, I surprised myself and will surprise all of you by my arithmetic: one third of life is spent lying without consciousness, without any guide in the mysterious world of sleep, and tapping the unseen depth of the source of healing secrets. Well, this may be the miracle of miracles, indeed anything can be a miracle.' Melnikov's Green City had as its centre something called 'The Institute for the Transformation of Humankind' – this starshaped thing here, in the middle, which would presumably be rather like a futurist version of the institutes at the centre of Hampstead Garden Suburb.



Konstantin Melnikov, 'Green City', 1930

The divide between city and country had a particularly harsh nature in the USSR at this point, when a forced collectivisation of farming was being imposed by the state in order to break the power of the country's peasantry. The Disurbanists proposed a reconciliation between the two rather than the outright war that was being preached at the time. Their leading theorist was Mikhail Okhitovich, who had been expelled from the Communist Party for supporting Trotsky's Left Opposition. His conception of the city had a great deal in common with the garden city idea, only here it was being advocated on a truly massive scale. Like the webs of interconnected, small cities envisaged in *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, Okhitovich declared that in the socialist city, 'the network would win, the centre would die'. There's a diagram of the Disurbanist settlement here, although the plan seems a little oblique.

In fact, Disurbanism resembles the Broadacre City project of Frank Lloyd Wright – modernist single family houses, spaced far apart, linked by an individual means of transport, stretching itself out over a space the size of a small country, and in so doing abolishing the divide between city and country in a way Howard might have balked at. This 'ribbon city', some designs for which you can see here in their counter-plans for Magnitogorsk, was made possible via the decentralising powers of electricity and highways, much as was the suburban expansion in England in the 30s. But production as well as housing would be distributed over these huge decentralised country-cities, in order to avert the brutalities of the war between the city and the village: this resembled individualism to the Stalinist leadership, and this wouldn't do. For his pains, Okhitovich would be hounded throughout the 1930s, eventually dying in the gulag in 1937. The Soviet Garden City would remain a proposal never truly acted upon.

## CODA - THE BRITISH NEW TOWNS



Houses at Silver End, by Burnet, Tait and Lorne, 1929

However botched they were, the many new towns that were built in the Soviet Union in the early 30s served as one of the inspirations for the New Towns built in Britain after World War Two. This would enable Howard's ideas being played out on a grand scale, although not always in the manner he might have intended. In fact, some early efforts at Modernist Garden Cities were made in Essex, of all places, in the late 1920s and early 30s. In Silver End, a small community of Modernist dwellings, the first in England, visibly influenced by Ernst May's work in Frankfurt, was designed to show off the generous windows made by the local factory and set appropriately alongside the flat Essex landscape: while in East Tilbury there was a direct import of Central European garden city planning. The Czech Bata shoe company created its own small town of cubic, detached houses, all with plenty of open space and gardens, which stand even now as a conception of the ideal city quite in contrast with that of Welwyn, though similarly based around the nuclear family. The more radical Soviet architect Berthold Lubetkin designed what was called 'a vertical garden city' in his Highpoint blocks, in Highgate.



Stevenage town centre

The heritage of the new programme was therefore somewhat controversial. The New Towns were very much opposed by the residents of the villages which would have new, semi-industrial neighbours, who usually drew attention to the dubious Leftist roots of such ideas – in the late 40s the signs on the first new town at Stevenage railway station were changed to ‘Silkingrad’, in reference to John Silkin, the Labour government’s minister for town planning . In true British style, the postwar new towns were often something of a compromise between the flat-roofed radicalism of the Germans and Russians and the cute cottages of the early English Garden Cities and Suburbs. Stevenage initially had some quite radical ideas. The central pedestrianised square, with its clocktower, modern sculptures, pool and glass walled shops, finally put Ebenezer Howard’s ideas for glass shopping arcades at the centre of garden cities into some sort of operation, and was imitated all over Europe. Meanwhile most of the housing was run by the local council, meaning that Stevenage and the 1940s new towns like it, such as Basildon, Harlow, Crawley and so forth offered decent housing and fresh air to more of the urban poor than any of the original Garden Cities ever managed.



Stevenage town centre

The New Towns would pivot between a sort of commuter-belt conservatism and the original utopian socialist hopes. The head of the New Town committee was Lord Reith, and fittingly they were often a little paternalist: areas of housing might be built around Henry Moore sculptures, for instance – ‘Family Group’ was put in front of a school in Stevenage in order to edify the former slum dwellers. They were often heavily criticised for not having strong identities, and becoming the suburbs they were designed to ward off. The New Towns designed later, like Cumbernauld in Scotland or Milton Keynes would very much have their own identity, although one that is frequently the butt of metropolitan jokes about concrete cows and shopping centres. All the New Towns though were alike in creating a massive amount of public space – parks, squares, courtyards, all municipal spaces in which no-one would try to sell you anything. However the original garden city was an attempt to dampen down class feeling as class conflict, and perhaps this accounts for the way that many of them would be centres of the turn to Conservatism of part of the English working class – Basildon for instance elected a Tory MP, much to the surprise of sociologists. The individualist side of the project might have won out over the socialist.



Henry Moore, 'Family Group', outside the Barclay school in Stevenage

In a sense, the Garden City would be replaced with the Gated Community. Its very telling that the only New Town built in Britain since the 1960s was Prince Charles' pet community of Poundbury in Dorset, which took the most conservative, medievalist elements of a Raymond Unwin and excised the utopian socialism that lay behind his simulation of the 14th century – though ultimately Poundbury has more in common with the theme park urbanism of Celebration, the planned town set up by the Disney corporation, than it does with Letchworth. The gated communities and Disney towns do resurrect one of the most unattractive features of the original Garden Cities and suburbs – the underlying fear of the mob, of the crowd, and of the city's chaos and diversity. Sometimes the original Garden Cities expressed themselves in terms that point to the essentially fearful impulses behind the project. Ralph Neville, a Liberal MP who helped bankroll Letchworth, wrote of how the city produces:

'The multitude of impressions received by the brain and the rapidity of their impressions, tend to induce shallowness of thought and instability of purpose. An increase of emotionalism and a loss of steadfastness are marked characteristics of town dwellers.' The dynamism, excitement, speed and drama of the city are part of what can so easily get lost in the Garden City idea. F.J Osborn, one of the planners of Welwyn Garden City, wrote scathingly in the 60s about Modernist architects' attempts to introduce 'excitement' into the garden city, as if he found the very idea of excitement contrary to their ethos. In one of his writings on the Paris of the 19th century, Walter Benjamin quoted a passage from Engels' Condition of the Working Class in England, in which Engels expressed his horror at the transience and bustle of the city crowd. Benjamin writes that this was written by someone that had never faced 'the temptation to lose himself in a stream of people'.

The experiments with a decentred urban planning in England, Germany and Russia offer all sorts of intriguing alternatives to the current system, where the idea of planning has almost disappeared along with the ideals of public housing and public space, while London and the South East continue to both grow and absorb the surrounding area – there’s nothing further from the ideas of Ebenezer Howard than the Thames Gateway’s mega-suburbia, currently being planned on a flood plain. The Garden Cities and Suburbs also suggest possibilities of creating cities that can survive climate change without just insulating and patching up the old city. The architects I’ve talked about - Raymond Unwin, Ernst May, Bruno Taut, Moisei Ginsburg, Nikolai Milyutin, Konstantin Melnikov, Mikhail Okhitovich, John Silkin - all had an inspirational, utopian charge to their plans and buildings. Nonetheless, underlying all these ideas is a refusal to look at cities as they actually are, but instead as what they could be. This idea can be world-transforming, and it can be just fiddling while London burns.