

LETCWORTH

THE FIRST GARDEN CITY'S ECONOMIC FUNCTION TRANSCRIBED FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the development and evolution of Letchworth Garden City in Hertfordshire, England, the first and most comprehensive attempt to actualize the amalgam of anarchist and utopian ideals on which Ebenezer Howard's Garden City movement is based. Letchworth's social and economic elements of integrated industry, agriculture, and cooperative land ownership eroded fairly quickly, leaving architectural and aesthetic concerns to dominate the Garden City's legacy. This legacy resounds in contemporary discussions of property rights and New Urbanism, suggesting its pertinence to issues of place and community has endured across widely different contexts and time periods. With the erosion of the Garden City model's founding ideologies, Letchworth demonstrates the tenacity of structural market and economic forces in guiding the implementation of planning projects.

INTRODUCTION

The idea and historical movement of the Garden City, particularly its image of self-sufficient, cooperative satellite towns with ample green space, has maintained relevance to contemporary issues of urban form, social organization, public health, and environmental sustainability. Yet in its 100 years of influence over new developments around the world, the movement has failed to deliver on its social and economic ideals. Letchworth, the first Garden City, is worth detailed examination as it is the most holistic attempt to actualize the amalgam of anarchist and utopian thought on which Ebenezer Howard's Garden City is based, particularly with regard to the integration of industry, agriculture, and cooperative land ownership. In Letchworth, as well as within the broader Garden City movement, these social and economic elements have largely been superseded by architectural and aesthetic concerns. Letchworth thus represents how an imperfect marriage of material and immaterial ideals manifested in the development and continuous evolution of a real Garden City.

THE GARDEN CITY'S IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The Garden City resembled other anarchistic reforms in its goal to foster liberty and self-interest alongside cooperation and equality (March 2004). Sir Peter Hall (2014) sees the main innovation of Howard's vision as the transfer of wealth back to the community through appreciated land values. This would be accomplished through regular upward revision of rents to account for increased land values generated by development: income that would allow trustees to pay debt while funding local welfare programs. Howard articulated an

urban land ethic of municipal ownership of land, individual control over land use, and allocation of labor and capital returns to the individual as well as the community (Richert and Lapping 2007). The essence of his vision was thus that appreciated land value due to development should benefit the community as a whole, rather than a particular class of landowners.

The novelty and endurance of Howard's Garden City lies not in its individual elements, but in the value added to them through his unique synthesis of several centuries of planning and social theory (Batchelor 1969; Hall 2014). During Howard's formative years, Utopian socialists such as Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Henri de Saint-Simon and planners such as Jeremy Bentham, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, and Robert Pemberton all published works on the subject of creating new communities to restructure rapidly urbanizing societies (Batchelor 1969). The Garden City shares foundations with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), including systematic settlement of the countryside to absorb urban crowds, separation of cities by agricultural belts at fixed distances, and limits on population and land area (ibid). Howard's model of cooperative industry is evident in John Bellers' *Proposals for Raising a Colledge of Industry of All Useful Trades and Husbandry* (1696), which introduced the concept of a self-sufficient college owned by its laborers through a prototypical joint-stock company organizational structure (ibid). Howard himself noted the influence of Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888), for its depiction of a technologicaly progressive and cooperative society that resolved class conflict between industrialists and land owners. However, Howard rejected the society's centralized, socialist organization in favor of anarchist Peter Kropotkin's vision of self-sufficiency at the city level, coupled with voluntary cooperation between residents (Rykwert 2000).

LETCHWORTH'S APPROVAL AND IMPLEMENTATION

Howard was not an armchair planner; he took an active role in putting his ideas into practice. After publishing *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in 1898, he garnered support for his vision by lecturing widely to religious groups, cooperative societies, and arts and crafts guilds (Buder 1990). Howard sought to inspire British Parliament to create towns in a similar model, demonstrating through Letchworth that relocation from crowded urban centers could benefit both industries and workers (Bonham-Carter 1951). Ironically, the realization of this goal of national government implementation through the New Towns program has been criticized as the driving force behind the perversion of the Garden City ideal (Hall 2014).

A critical transition in Letchworth's development occurred in 1901, when the Garden City Association's (GCA) board of directors gained two key members who tacitly overtook Howard's leadership role. Prominent barrister Ralph Neville became Chairman, and Scottish surveyor Thomas Adams became Secretary. Together, they set the project on a more pragmatic, business-oriented trajectory (Buder 1990; Miller 1989). Specifically, they perceived that it would be difficult to raise funds through Howard's envisioned structure of granting title to the city to a board of trustees on behalf of residents, with a democratically elected council responsible for city management. In response, the GCA board created a limited-dividend company that protected stockholder shares via community control (Buder 1969). The ideology of local control and anarchist cooperation embodied in the council was at odds with the broader market considerations of the limited-dividend company in securing adequate returns on capital investments (Hall and Ward 2014). In addition, the adjustments to the ideal Garden City's ownership and management structure proved insufficient for attracting the start-up investment Letchworth needed to develop self-sufficient industrial and agricultural sectors.

In 1902, the GCA chose the estate Letchford Manor as the site for the first garden city because it met many of the physical characteristics described by Howard: it was about thirty miles from London,

had depressed agriculture and low land prices, and was just under 4,000 acres (Miller 1989). First Garden City Ltd. Company (FGC Ltd.) established Letchworth in 1903 with fifteen owners and £300,000 in capital. By the time of the city's formal opening, just £40,000 had been raised, which was less than half of the desired start-up funds. As a result of this undercapitalization, it was not possible for the municipality to build houses, shops, industrial facilities, or public buildings for over ten years (Hall 2014). Firms were deterred from relocating to Letchworth because of this lack of public goods, as well as requirements limiting their freedom that included a trust deed, a five percent dividend maximum, and profit distribution (ibid).

Among these deterrents, limited start-up capital was at the crux of Letchworth's slow population and industry growth, which amplified the inherent weaknesses of its economic structure (Hall 2014). A lack of competition between industrialists and agricultural tenants caused land values to stagnate, generating little revenue for investment in infrastructure and other facilities, which continued to limit Letchworth's attractiveness to new development. These shortcomings are evidence of the practical concessions that had to be made in order to manifest certain Garden City ideals, specifically with regards to equity, rights, inclusion, and local autonomy (March 2004). Miller (1989) agrees that the weakest part of Howard's vision as applied to Letchworth was the integration of the roles within FGC Ltd. of a landlord, development company, and local authority. This integration was not compatible with the Garden City's political foundation of local democratic control through local government structure. Market realities in Letchworth led to financially driven decision making by the Board, rather than by democratic power of residents. For example, Howard's original plan to distribute private profits for the benefit the town was dismissed, and the limitation on shareholders' dividends to five percent returns was revoked in 1949 (Lewis 2013).

PHYSICAL FORM AND DESIGN

The Garden City's most notable legacy has been its informal and vernacular physical form, as well as its integration with natural features such as a greenbelt and commons areas of woodland and meadow (Buder 1990; Hall 2014; Stern et al. 2013). Among the 1,500 acres planned for development in Letchworth, nine percent (or 135 acres) was reserved for industry, which was on par with other towns' industrial land area proportions at the time (Pepler 1926). However, this provision proved overly optimistic: a lack of competition among potential lessees kept rents and land values stagnant, generating insufficient revenue to capitalize public goods (Miller 1998). The impacts of Letchworth's physical design extended beyond later Garden City projects such as Hampstead and Welwyn by Howard, Sir Raymond Unwin, and other early collaborators. As governments committed to expanding public housing after World War I, local authorities chose garden suburbs such as Hampstead as the physical model (Hall and Ward 2014). The density and area standards of Garden City housing influenced the physical form of low-rise council housing after World War I throughout the UK, and these standards were integrated with legislation (Miller 1979). By 1910, though some of the ideology embodied in Letchworth remained, much of its founding principles had been reassembled to yield garden suburbs instead of self-sufficient satellite towns (S. Ward 2005). Hall (2014) compares the actualization of physical rather than social elements of the Garden City vision to a shell without substance, lacking a cooperative arrangement and vital link between industry and land.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

The Garden City's land-tenure model of tenant co-partnership blended elements of a tenant cooperative and limited dividend company, attempting to balance interests between the community, tenants, and landlords (Birchall 1995). A ninety-nine-year leasehold system was considered favorable to selling the land outright because it allowed rents to be revised each century to account for increased land values, providing a greater degree of control over land use and the ability for landlords to rebuild worn-out buildings

at lease termination (ibid). Tenants had the option to choose a ten-year lease, which would have allowed for the city to capitalize more rapidly on improved land values; however, in self-interest, almost all tenants chose the ninety-nine-year lease to lock themselves into lower rents (Hall 2014).

The failure of the cooperative movement to back Letchworth's tenant co-partnership, the effects of World War I, the prevalence of council housing, and tensions within the co-partnership jointly led to the failure of this system (Birchall 1995). Howard's vision of cooperative industrial enterprise was also watered down in its Letchworth manifestation: blue collar workers in this sector gravitated toward socialism and trade unionism instead of participating in cooperatives (Hall 2014). Working-class residents were at first excluded because of the requirement to have enough capital to build their own homes when Letchworth was first developed. Later, the sterile social environment and low density relative to urban industrial areas did not meet the needs of workers and families to socialize in the public realm. However, FGC Ltd. did follow through with some social-equity projects, such as the Letchworth Education Council, which used Company and County funds to provide working- and middle-class children with education that surpassed publically mandated curriculum requirements (ibid).

In 1967, the national Leasehold Reform Act allowed individual leaseholders of residential properties the option to buy their property from FGC Ltd., which had until that point insisted on retaining freehold ownership of the Letchworth Estate in order to control its development and to fund future investment in the town (Lewis 2013). To preserve the appearance and character of Letchworth, those who purchased their freehold and wanted to make external changes to their property were required to obtain consent from the Scheme of Management of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation. This consent was separate from permission required from the local planning authority under planning legislation and building regulations. Today, the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, a charitable organization established in 1995, annually reinvests four million pounds of revenue into social and cultural projects, generated from a gift of commercial and residential property from the Letchworth Garden City Corporation (ibid). Thus, contemporary

regulation and control in Letchworth seems to be a continuation of historical trends, emphasizing aesthetic and cultural rather than socioeconomic aspects.

CITY, NOT SUBURB: THE ROLE OF INDUSTRY AND AGRICULTURE

The essential miscalculation in the economic planning and development of Letchworth was the assumption that potential land value gains in a new settlement could attract industry away from forces of urban agglomeration in metropolitan London. Though industry had been shifting to the London periphery for decades, it was still concentrating within the metropolitan area because of lower costs and other benefits that firms enjoy when they co-locate (Heilbrun 1974). The siting of Letchworth fifteen miles beyond London's industrial periphery, as well as its underinvestment in infrastructure, meant that the city had to compete with London's growing economies of scope, including linkages across industries, population trends, employment requirements, and urban cost factors. These agglomerative forces favored increased integration between metropolitan cores and peripheries, opposing the Garden City's ideal of increased autonomy among urban satellites (Miller 1998).

Meanwhile, the era of close linkages between cities and their agricultural hinterlands was already over, rendering another premise of Letchworth's economic organization anachronistic. Thus, Letchworth never established a significant agricultural sector. At its opening, hundreds of applicants sought land for smallholdings, but few had the capital to build their own homes. This at first limited Letchworth's population to middle-class bohemians, though the socioeconomic diversity of the population later grew with the arrival of government-subsidized housing in the 1920s. Those who could afford it were offered quarter-acre cottage plots with a contiguous area of agricultural land on a twenty-one-year lease. In 1905, a 153-acre smallholdings center was established at Norton Hall Farm, under the Norton Cooperative Smallholdings Society. In 1907, model smallholdings were included in the 1907 Cottage Exhibition, but none were successful in the long-term, and in the 1930s that

land was developed. Also, because of Letchworth's mostly clay or chalk soils, crops did not flourish. However, domestic gardens were common and produce contributed significantly to family diets and budgets: a 1953 study estimated that there were 6,000 gardens in Letchworth, averaging about seventy-five pounds of food produced per garden (Miller 1989).

While Letchworth did eventually develop a manufacturing sector, historians agree that it did not meet expectations in terms of attracting industry, as many industrialists were wary about a limit of five percent on returns and profit-sharing obligations (Hall 2014). Because Letchworth lacked raw materials and was located relatively far from labor and consumer markets, it was better suited to skilled manufacturing than heavy industry (Miller 1989). Within the first decade of Letchworth's development, about a dozen factories were built, with firms in printing, publishing, and engineering serving as the early adopters that established the city's reputation and accelerated the influx of industry after World War I (Hooson 1958; Miller 1989). Spirella, the large corset manufacturing company which arrived in 1910 near the civic center and railroad station, as well as cottage-industry tapestry workshops, were significant presences (Stern et al. 2013). By the early 1950s, Letchworth was Hertfordshire County's center of non-agricultural industry, particularly in manufacturing and metal-using industries, which provided two-thirds of the city's employment (Hooson 1958). At that point, there was a healthy diversity of industry represented, including book printing, food processing, timber, and furniture, with 134 factories and workshops spanning 190 acres (Bonham-Carter 1951).

TRANSCRIPTION FROM THE IDEAL TO THE PRACTICAL IN LETCHWORTH

Letchworth is much more than historical artifact: continuous re-examination relates the Garden City to modern problems and needs in planning, suggesting that certain values of place and community have endured through drastically different eras (Saiki et al. 2005). The development and evolution of Letchworth illustrates a self-consciously thorough attempt to transcribe theory to practice. In this transcription, however, much was altered. The importance

of urban agglomeration forces and industrial location undermined the Garden City ideal of self-sufficient industrial and agricultural production. These forces, coupled with initial undercapitalization of basic facilities and public goods, limited Letchworth's financial ability to deliver on the social reformist elements of Howard's vision. In particular, the envisioned economic and political reforms involving cooperative land ownership and city management through a democratic council were eclipsed by physical and environmental concerns, as well as private speculation and government control.

The erosion of social and economic ideals from the development of Letchworth, the first Garden City, to the garden suburbs and new towns that followed reveals emphasis on physical arrangement and form, generating developments that have been criticized for perpetuating rather than alleviating social inequalities (Hall 2014; Toker and Toker 2006). The contemporary New Urbanism movement attracts similar criticism for purporting an ideal social order in small communities just outside of cities, but in effect generating exclusive, stylized developments that reinforce spatial socioeconomic stratification (Ward 1990). Echoes of Garden City ideals resound across broader discussions of property rights, particularly in the call for a greater sense of community to counter decades of social corrosion caused by privatization and neoliberal economics. It is not surprising that this dialogue of social reform has focused on the built environment, using language of "the commons" to champion mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented building projects to foster diversity (Blackmar 2006). The case of Letchworth Garden City demonstrates that structural market and economic forces are tenacious in guiding the implementation of reformist planning projects.

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