

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# A hundred years of town planning and the influence of Ebenezer Howard

The Garden City Association, now the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), was founded on the 10th of June 1899 by a group of men hoping to create a new way of living. They were led by Ebenezer Howard, the author of *To-morrow! A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Originally the TCPA planned to celebrate its centenary by publishing a new edition of Howard's book. Instead, the Association's Chairman, Sir Peter Hall, and its former Environmental Education Officer, Colin Ward, have produced a commemorative volume in two parts. The first part consists of a detailed and interesting history of the life and works of Ebenezer Howard, and the influence of his and related ideas on town planning during the past century. The second part of the book is a chronicle of Hall and Ward's ideas about the best way to accommodate the proposed building of new houses in the UK over the next few decades. Not surprisingly, the authors want to show that Howard's thinking is relevant to current housing and town planning issues. They struggle to do so, sometimes making big claims for Howard, and at other times getting on with their own ideas and leaving Howard to one side. This book is a pivotal publication which is intended to celebrate the achievements of the town planning movement. The centenary means one thing to the members of the town planning establishment, and quite another thing to outsiders, like myself, who come from the social science tradition.

Hall and Ward describe Howard's life prior to writing *Tomorrow!*, later republished as *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, as, 'one of hard grind and personal failure' (p. 4). Howard emigrated to America, where he tried unsuccessfully to make a go of farming. When disaster struck, he was able to rescue his family and earn a very modest living by moving to Chicago and working as a shorthand writer. He returned to London in 1876 and carried on with shorthand as a Parliamentary reporter. He had no particular educational background, but always took an interest in social movements, rejecting most, but being rather drawn to the economist Henry George and his single land tax. Howard appears to have been a decent enough fellow

with something of a gift for oratory. He hardly seems to be the kind of person who would write a book which, in Hall and Ward's phrase, 'would change the course of history' (p. 3).

Howard looked at country life and city life in his day and found them both most unsatisfactory. While the country was beautiful, it was a place of unemployment for many, and low wages and long hours for the rest. It lacked both physical amenities, and opportunity for advancement. Villages were either deserted, or had crowded dwellings with primitive facilities. In addition to the physical grind, there was a spiritual vacuum. The country, in Howard's view, had neither public-spirit nor places of entertainment. As bad as the country was, the city was no better. The beauty of nature was replaced by foul air, murky skies, slums and gin palaces. For some there was opportunity, but all faced long journeys to work, high rents, and the isolation of crowds. The possibility of earning higher wages than in the country, and the presence of places of amusement, were far from being sufficient compensation for the drawbacks of the city.

Of course, many other observers of society at the time were equally critical. Reforming zeal was very much in evidence, with ideas ranging from anarchism, socialism, Marxism, Fabianism, and many others. Howard devoted some thought to many of the solutions to the social problems of the day that various groups were promoting. In the end, he came to reject them all. In their turn, these movements came to reject his ideas. 'The Fabian Society, some of whose leading lights were on close terms with Howard, were openly contemptuous' (p. 30). Where others wanted to achieve reform through changing social systems, Howard proposed a physical solution. He would combine the best of the city and the country in the Garden City, and through multiple Garden Cities, link up the individual Garden Cities to form the Social City. While others were thinking about matters such as who should own the means of production, Howard was publishing maps of utopia.

In Howard's world the social life and the entertainments of the city would combine with the beauty and fresh air of the country. Wages would be high and rents low. Getting about would be easy, with short distances between home, work and shopping. All this would be done with very little enforcement or infringement of individual liberty. The important decisions were how many people to have in the Garden City, and where to put them. The rest would follow naturally. Everyone would want to live in such an ideal place. When the numbers reached the optimal level, a new Garden City would be started up. In the end, all the Garden Cities would combine to form the new world order. Everybody wins, and nobody loses.

The basic 'all win' idea in Howard's utopia rests on land values. The countryside is not economically viable. Rural land is very cheap. A collective buys up a substantial tract at a price a bit over the odds, pleasing the sellers. Out of this rural wasteland comes an economically viable entity producing, 'clothing, cycles, engineering, jam-making . . .' (p. 20). Firms would be happy to migrate to this 'smoke-free' place, which boasts a contented and healthy workforce. Outstanding infrastructure and a high level

of welfare and educational services would be provided, without taxation, by the public use of the rent on the homes and work places located in the Garden City. It is as simple as that. The people who put up the initial money to buy the land and build homes, roads, parks, sewage facilities and the like, get paid at a commercial rate from the future rents. The people left behind in London are also better off, as crowding is reduced, rents fall, and the environment improves. There is no sector or interest that loses in this process, and the gains to all are enormous.

Hall and Ward see this proposal in very positive terms. 'Seldom in history can any book have had such an extraordinary impact' (p. 3). Exactly where this impact is to be found will be discussed later. What is surprising is that the authors of this centenary volume make no effort to examine Howard's ideas in a critical fashion. They report the influences on him and how this modest shorthand writer moved in the loftiest intellectual circles including Bernard Shaw, Beatrice Webb, and many others. They discuss the various competing proposals of the day and the different institutions that they promoted. All this is done in a most engaging way. When we come to the efforts to implement the Garden City ideas, Hall and Ward trace out Howard's struggle faithfully and enthusiastically. The authors see Howard's dream as an important idea. But whether in fact it makes any sense at all is not discussed. The most that they are prepared to say is that the physical plan and the means of bringing it about, 'proved much harder to achieve in reality than on paper' (p. 17). But why, we might ask? This is a plan which, according to its author, benefits everyone.

The first thing we might want to explain is why this kind of development did not occur more-or-less spontaneously. Investors like to make money. Why would they not buy up land and make the necessary additional investments that would attract firms and workers, knowing that their property values would increase very substantially? Was it just that they lacked Howard's circular layout and the rest of his planning concepts? This is very doubtful. And in any case, once the book came out, any shrewd investor could copy the plan. It would have helped if Hall and Ward had addressed this point. If they were to do so, they might come up with the suggestion that there is a rather basic flaw in the centre of Howard's thinking.

In the financing of Howard's scheme, everything depends on the behaviour of the land values. We get this asset very cheaply. The sellers have no rational expectations, and cannot see that they could either charge more, or do the scheme themselves. Well, maybe they could not do it themselves. Maybe even with foresight, they would have to sell out cheaply. There might be too much competition among the sellers, and they probably would lack the capital to finance the development themselves. But now we come to the big problem. The land values rise, as we would expect in any town. There is ample opportunity to collect higher rents, and this generates a surplus which pays off the investors at a competitive rate, and leaves enough over to pay for parks, museums, schools, hospitals and theatres. What we are not told by Hall and Ward is that there is only one place all this surplus can

come from, and that is the productivity of the firms migrating to the Garden City.

What Howard failed to see was that in order for his scheme to work, productivity in the Garden City would have to be much higher than in London. Playing tricks with land values will not work. We could equally well propose that all rent is free, and we pay off the investors and finance the physical and social infrastructure out of taxes. Ultimately there is only one place the greater prosperity of the Garden City could come from, and that is in the much higher productivity of the enterprises located there. Whether we cream off this surplus, if it exists, in rents or taxes is not important. The inputs of capital and labour must result in more jam in the Garden City than elsewhere. If the output is roughly the same, or only a little better, the scheme will not work. Oddly enough, Hall and Ward do not mention productivity in their book.

By 1902 Howard had generated enough support for his concept so that he could devote full time to it. The first thing to do was raise capital to finance the search for a suitable site. The Garden City Association had 1,300 members, and many were distinguished figures in public life. The economist Alfred Marshall was a member. From this group it was possible to raise £20,000 to get started. After some deliberation, 3,800 acres were purchased at Letchworth for £155,000. The first, and as it happens, the only true Garden City was on the move. Unfortunately, the project ran into financing difficulty almost immediately. It was estimated that £300,000 had to be raised to pay off the investors and to provide the buildings and infrastructure. In a short time this estimated figure rose to £600,000. Initially, only the Directors of the Garden City Pioneer Company, as it was called, put in money which came to £40,000. Some £60,000 of shares were sold to the public. After three years £150,000 had been raised. It was ten years before any money was paid to investors, and that was a 1 per cent payment. After another ten years, a 5 per cent payment was made. In 1945 the minimal contractual payment to investors was made. So much for the ease of financing the scheme from rents. Howard himself attempted to change the rules of the game, and adopted the view that Letchworth should be financed as a philanthropic undertaking. His fellow Directors did not go along with this idea. In the end they removed Howard from any decision making about finances (p. 34).

Most observers agree that the physical realization of Letchworth under the direction of the architects Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker was a success. In some ways their ideas ran counter to those of Howard, but they put a stamp on suburban and new town design. The layout of homes and the rest was attractive, but it took much more time than envisaged to attract people to the Garden City. After 35 years Letchworth had a population of 15,000. This was half the projected number. For the most part, workers could not afford the houses in the Garden City, and some commuted, living in cheap housing put up by speculators (pp. 35–6). Firms proved even more difficult to attract than residents did. An exception was the printing firm

J.M. Dent that came for idealistic reasons. Letchworth came to be viewed as a place for eccentrics. Soon the Directors began to offer leasehold sites, and the concept Howard had envisaged was effectively dead. Letchworth came closer to the original idea than any other place, but not very close. Howard had one more try with Welwyn Garden City. However, this scheme abandoned the special financing ideas even faster than Letchworth. Unwin went on to design Hampstead Garden Suburb. While successful, it had none of Howard's financial ideas, none of his physical plan, and was not a self-contained place combining work and residences. No other Letchworth type scheme was ever tried. Hall and Ward make an odd comment. 'We will never know whether these bolder experiments might have worked, had they been repeated more insistently' (p. 36).

Howard's Garden City idea with its special approach to financing and its combination of work and residences was not taken up, but there was a movement to build new towns in the UK. Hall and Ward discuss how Raymond Unwin became, 'a major power in the land' (p. 41). As Chief Architect for the Ministry of Health, and author of *Nothing Gained by Overcrowding!*, he was influential in advocating government subsidizing of the building of cottage housing, with twelve houses to the acre. 'Homes for Heroes' was an attractive idea after the First World War. Captain Richard Reiss became the Chairman of the Garden City Town Planning Association Council. Frederic Osborn, a dedicated and tireless campaigner for new towns, became secretary of the Council in 1936. Partly under his influence, the phrase 'Garden City' was dropped and the name of the Association was changed in 1941 to Town and Country Planning Association. Finally, in 1946, with the passage of the New Towns Act, the British Government took a decision to actively build new towns. Twenty-eight new towns were built, and these came to house about 3 per cent of the population. Hall and Ward describe these developments, with an emphasis on the politics involved. They hardly discuss Howard at all in this context, other than to note that the approach of the government paid no attention to Howard's idea of the Sociable City made up of a cluster of Garden Cities (p. 55). They also note the tendency for the new towns to be more of commuter towns than free-standing settlements. This new town movement, too, they see as coming to an end '... in the 1990s, the new towns appear truly as a piece of history, on which the last page has almost turned' (p. 67).

The next two chapters of this book are largely about recreational use of the countryside, particularly by the less affluent members of society. There is discussion of 'plotlands' – the division of farms into small plots, largely for holiday homes. Another development was the Land Settlement Association, which promoted small-scale greenhouse agriculture. Hall and Ward see Howard as having a 'prophetic' grasp on these and related developments. It is not easy to support them in that contention. Indeed, they themselves point out that the main movement into the countryside was of a kind very different from that favoured, and predicted, by Howard: 'the exodus was not to the hard-won pastures of the promised land. It was to an ampler

style of urban commuting' (p. 86). But if Howard was neglected in his own country, perhaps his ideas had more influence abroad. Hall and Ward look at a number of planning exercises in Spain, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and France.

The conclusion is clear: very consistently, mainland Europe either failed to understand Howard's argument, or wilfully misinterpreted it . . . The notion of deliberately creating more or less self-contained new towns or new town clusters, distant from the metropolis and outside its daily sphere of influence, was clearly foreign to the continental mind: an English notion that did not travel well across the Channel. (p. 99)

Of course, this is correct. But is it fair to describe this as 'an English notion'? It is Howard's idea. It was rejected at home as well as on the Continent. Hall and Ward do rather suggest, without actually coming out and saying so, that it was a viable idea that could have been implemented. Unless they have some explanation as to why productivity in the Garden City will be vastly higher than elsewhere, or an answer as to why this need not be the case in order for the scheme to succeed, we must disagree with these centenary authors and suggest instead that Howard's model could not be applied anywhere because his approach was naive and fundamentally flawed.

Now we come to Part II of the Hall and Ward volume. Here there are three broad themes. The first is the alleged need to build 4.4 million new homes over the next two decades. This well-known figure comes from the Department of the Environment. The reasoning runs this way. The total population will remain more-or-less constant, but more young people will leave home, and there will be, 'many more divorces and separations . . .' (p. 111). It is also part of the story that people will live longer. If that is coupled with a stable total population, that implies a lower birth rate. The upshot is many more one-person households. Hence the need for a mammoth building programme.

A very odd feature of the discussion is the notion that there is such a thing as a dwelling of a given kind and size, and that nearly four and a half million of them will have to be provided. One might have thought that accommodation could be provided in quite a variety of ways. The mix of flats and homes, with or without gardens, could vary over a huge range. If cost was not an object, clearly most people, including this growing breed of young people, divorced people, and old people living alone, would like a lot of space. They might want a detached house with a fair amount of land. But, of course, cost is a factor. Hall and Ward never mention price. It is as if what people want and can afford is independent of price. Nor is there any mention of the budget for all this building, let alone how much of it is to come from the public purse and how much is to be privately funded. The basic assumption is that the need for housing can be discussed without any reference to the various prices of what is provided. A dwelling is a dwelling, and that is that.

The second theme is sustainability. Hall and Ward acknowledge that this

term can be almost devoid of meaning. For example, at one point they report that the most important impact of locating in rural areas comes from additional use of the motor car. But is this really the case? The authors may see themselves as being even handed when they go on to write that these matters are, 'the subject of fierce disagreement among experts' (p. 117). The authors have an irritating habit of putting forward strong and apparently usable statements, and then quietly suggesting that the opposite may well be the case. Another example would be the trend on balance to moving into big cities, or to moving out of them. Hall and Ward assert,

in virtually every advanced country . . . cities have decentralised. The evidence is now overwhelming that both population and, behind it, employment are moving out, and that this process is most marked in the largest metropolitan areas . . . (p. 125)

This seems clear enough. But then they go on to refer to Paul Cheshire, apparently with approval, to the effect that, 'the process may have partly gone into reverse in the 1980s' (p. 125). So here we are, nearly twenty years later, and what is the situation? Are people moving into or out of the big cities? Hall and Ward refuse to bite the bullet and take a position, even the position of not knowing the answer.

The third great issue of this part of the book is whether the new dwellings should be built, or can all be built, on brownfield sites in cities, or whether at least some have to be placed on greenfield sites in the country. There are greenfield sites in London, and Hall and Ward argue that, 'we should surely place a moratorium on further urban greenfield development . . .' (p. 129). Having shut the door, they then open it a crack with an exception. But that is only a quibble. The authors conclude that some building on greenfield sites will have to take place. For them, the question is how to do this. Not unnaturally, they start by turning to Howard 'while the world has changed almost out of all recognition, his message still has a startling, almost surreal relevance to us in the Britain of 1998' (p. 142). What the authors mean by this is that people did move into the countryside. However, the government did nothing to either stop or accommodate this movement 'because they failed to provide for it as Howard suggested, they have been stuck with the worst of all worlds' (p. 143). Hall and Ward at this point do not credit Howard with either predicting or influencing the outcome. On the other hand, in another section, Hall and Ward write that, 'over the intervening century, we have turned the English countryside into a version of Howard's town-country on a vast scale' (p. 105). And in their view in this section of the book, this was not an accidental outcome. Following the lead of Howard was in part a 'conscious' decision. Perhaps this willingness to live with contradiction is what Hall and Ward mean by 'surreal' relevance.

After this confusing effort to see what guidance Howard might offer to the problem of locating many new homes, the authors turn to 'Contemporary Academic Wisdom'. They refer to a number of studies by planners,

geographers and others. These are distilled to a straightforward message 'it is best to locate developments on strong public transport corridors, close to medium-sized towns that will continue to provide the main sources of employment, and rail corridors offer particularly good prospects' (p. 146). Those who are familiar with Hall's work will see this as a re-statement of a position he has taken many times. In this volume it combines nicely with Ward's environmental concerns. At this point the confidence and enthusiasm of the authors is high: 'These building blocks give us all we need to develop sustainable packages of land use and transport policies' (p. 149). What we have to do is to promote public transport and at the same time discourage the practice of single-user driving. Oh, and before I forget, there is one other detail to be attended to: 'develop new forms of propulsion which are less polluting and more economical of energy than the internal combustion engine . . .' (p. 123). One can only hope that this is not a precondition for the success of the authors' detailed proposals for 'corridors' for the Thames Gateway, the West Coast Main Line from Euston to Birmingham, the 'City of Mercia' (incorporating Rugby, Northampton, etc.), the 'City of Anglia' (incorporating Cambridge, Peterborough, etc.), and the 'City of Kent'.

The final three chapters of the book are largely about the politics of achieving their plan for building many of the new houses in their chosen corridors. Much of this analysis is short on actual content. For example, Hall and Ward point to a need, 'To develop appropriate agencies and mechanisms to bring the land forward in the right amounts and at the right times . . . without putting excessive claims on the public purse' (p. 171). It is difficult to argue with the suggestion that mechanisms be 'appropriate', that quantities be 'right', and that burdens not be 'excessive'. But what does this actually mean, and where does Howard come into all of this? The authors, 'ruefully conclude that tomorrow's version of Howard's Social Cities, catering for the projections of household formation, *can* be provided through the intelligent exploitation of light rail networks, but it is unattainable . . .' (p. 199). To use the language of economists, Howard's vision is not in the feasible set. Given that, what do we mean when we say it '*can* (the authors' emphasis) be provided'? From the context it must mean that if the political structure of the country were to change, then we could usefully implement Howard's plan. But even this is thrown into doubt in the very last paragraph of the book. Here we are told that, 'Howard's century-old prescription remains extraordinarily useful, both for planing policy and for its opponents' (p. 209). Does this mean that whatever you believe, you can quote Howard to your advantage?

All academic disciplines look back to important founding fathers. Economists refer to Adam Smith. Sociologists refer to Durkheim and Parsons. Both draw heavily on Marx. For the discipline of town planning, the Hall and Ward centenary volume make the case for Ebenezer Howard. They claim that he changed the world. This simply is not true. In a small way he did change the academic world by contributing to a sub-discipline. Most of

the issues which town planners, including the authors of this book, address fall in the realms of economics, political science and sociology. There is some implied reference to anthropology in how communities are structured and how migrations occur. How people perceive physical environments brings in social psychology. But the bulk of what they are talking about is either economics, political science or sociology. Of course, the authors are not expert in any of these fields. What they are experts in is the discipline of town planning. For them Howard is an important founding father. In helping to create this discipline, we find the actual contribution of Howard. He may not have influenced the world, but he certainly influenced the discipline of town planning.

We have to be honest and acknowledge that virtually all the work that goes on under the heading of town planning is amateur when viewed by the standards of the social science disciplines whose subject matter it addresses. This is a familiar problem when the organizing principle of a subject is the subject matter rather than the disciplines needed for investigation. Media studies is another example, as is sports studies. There is a lot of economics involved in sport, as there is sociology and medicine. Who is better equipped to investigate these matters; a specialist in sport, or an economist, a sociologist, or a medical expert?

The gentlemanly answer is that we need both types. We need people who devote their lives to the study of phenomena which cross academic disciplines. These people could be experts on roads, for example – the economics of roads, the politics of roads, and so on. Another example would be recreational drugs – the psychology of drug use, the sociology, and so on. As it happens, these usually are the people who are seen on television as experts, as defined and labelled by the subject matter, and very likely they will be listened to and, indeed, courted, by governments. Naturally, they will have a smattering of knowledge of the relevant disciplines which they knowingly or unknowingly employ. However, in most cases, this smattering will not be enough to do the job. At the same time, with an issue like town planning, there is something to be said with familiarity on the ground with many developments around the world. When asked during the Presidential campaign what he intended to do about the Korean War, Eisenhower replied that he intended to go there. Obviously this was politically astute, but it is not entirely silly either. Town planners have something similar to offer. They go there. They are familiar with what is on the ground.

In the tension between subject matter orientation and discipline orientation, I put my money on disciplines. If I want to know how television effects children, I would rather have a social psychologist on the job than a media expert. But coming back to the Town and County Planning Association, and its members and practitioners, many people today who are not in the club find two dimensional planning, with little concern for what things actually look like, quite misleading. Similarly, a discussion of the need for housing with no mention of the price of what might be provided, is misleading. It is my guess that the town planner will not go away. In spite

of some reservations, I think this is as it should be. A successful practitioner will know quite a lot. Among the things that a town planner might want to know is how architectural and engineering design impinge on the workings of the built environment. But this is another story. Ebenezer Howard did not have much of an idea about economics, nor is it reasonable to expect him to. The subject of sociology was in its infancy, and neither he nor anyone else knew much about it. Times change. The successful academic town planner will know her or his limitations. They will recognize a sociological or economic issue, and be prepared to integrate serious sociology and economics into the problem by drawing on the specialists. The test of a subject matter oriented discipline is its ability to employ the many specialist disciplines that bear on its subject matter. The evidence of this centenary volume is that town planning has some way to go to meet this test.

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*Book Reviewed:*

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