Commentary

'A Peaceful Path to' Healthy Bodies: The Biopolitics of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City

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Abstract

Recent renewed discussions of the garden city as a "developmental model for the present and foreseeable future" (Stern, Fishman, & Tilove, 2013) have prompted us to reflect upon its endurance as an agent of spatial and urban reform. Looking to extend the established garden city literature, we argue the history of Ebenezer Howard's community model should be reexamined as a cultural history of body and environmental politics. In this commentary, we explicate how Howard's garden city model served as a spatial vehicle for installing the biopolitical agendas of Victorian reformers keen to "civilize" working class bodies in the service of British industrial and imperial power. This entails a brief examination of the biopolitical dimensions of garden city history, keying on the prescribed restructuring of urban life and the concomitant "regeneration" of working class bodies within and through garden city designs. Our aim is to challenge scholars, planners, and policymakers of the garden city *present*, to consider the ways the garden city was historically planned to reproduce the cultural, spatial, and biopolitical relations of Western capitalism.

Issue

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1. Introduction

> Planning is an exercise of power. (White, 1995)

In September 2014 the international politics magazine *Foreign Policy* reported on the revival of Sir Ebenezer Howard's (1898) "garden city" as a fruitful model for sustainable urban planning (Hurley, 2014). The article's central premise keyed on the salience of Howard's model as an ecologically-friendly strategy of urban reform, designed to address the multiplying effects of climate change through the adoption of more preserved green spaces and humane planning schemes. "Some people," the tagline proclaimed, "think it just might help save the planet" (Hurley, 2014). One such advocate was Yale Uni-

versity Professor Robert A. M. Stern, who conspicuously anointed the garden city a "developmental model for the present and foreseeable future" (Stern, Fishman, & Tilove, 2013). Further corroborating the renewed interest in garden cities, only a few months prior to the *Foreign Policy* piece, U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron announced the building of at least three new garden city-inspired communities as part of his Conservative Government's strategy for addressing the nation's escalating housing shortage (Mason, 2014). Evidently, the garden city is experiencing something of a twenty-first century renaissance.

There is little need to recapitulate the acknowledged significance of Howard's garden city in the history of urban, town and regional planning. Historians (Beevers,

1988; Meacham, 1999; Parsons & Schuyler, 2002) have long examined the important economic, social and cultural contexts surrounding the garden city's emergence in Howard's foundational and influential treatise, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898). Others (Buder, 1990; Creese, 1966) have elucidated the international dissemination of the garden city in the twentieth century, and the movement's wide-ranging impact on the global planning of new, preconceived cities. There is also an abundance of scholarship shedding light on the achievements and problems of the international garden city movement, including the planners' links to "techno-cities" (Kargon & Molella, 2008), class paternalism (Meacham, 1999), colonialism (Bigon & Katz, 2014), eugenics (Voigt, 1989), and the values and relations of capitalism (Pinder, 2005). Furthermore, the garden city can now be understood in terms of its impact on the rise of New Urbanism (Stephenson, 2002), the international movement for New Towns (Buder, 1990; Christensen, 1986), and the history of urban public health policies (Corburn, 2009, 2013). Hence, through myriad vehicles and venues—and whether acknowledged or otherwise—the garden city continues to inform the philosophy and practice of modern urban planning as the world enters the "age of the Smart City" (Hügel, 2017).

The enduring influence of the garden city on urban design prompted us to reflect upon what we consider to be a routinely overlooked dimension of this complex phenomenon. Namely, the cultural politics—or what we refer to as the biopolitics—of the garden city movement. In *To-Morrow* (1898), Howard wrote of the community model's amenities in terms of their social, physical, and natural "healthfulness," and its prescribed form looking not just at the reformation of urban environments, but also, and crucially, for the reformation of urban bodies. For some reason, contemporary commentators habitually fail to acknowledge the unapologetically eugenic and biopolitical objectives articulated within, and through, Howard's schematic. For instance, in Hurley's (2014) and Stern, Fishman and Tilove's (2013) contemporary accounts, the garden city is strictly an agent of spatial and urban reform: an influential experiment in potentially sustainable community building, prefigured on the planning and execution of: "well-built homes for people of diverse means," "clean air and ample green space," and a local, ample "employment, education, and culture…" (Hurley, 2014). While each of these elements incorporates an embodied dimension—specifically in their goal of improving the health and well-being of community residents—the patrician pathologizing of urban bodies and cultures so engrained within Howard's philosophy is largely overlooked.

The garden city was fundamentally a biopoliticized community model for repopulating and restoring the health and constitution of urban working class bodies. While expressed in different iterations, each garden city community was designed to prescribe particular, bourgeois forms of embodied living. The planners

imagined that pre-industrial, pastoral living and social arrangements—with their country cottages, perceived architectural modesty and durability, fresh rural air, sunlight, familial and village cooperation, local produce, and open, natural spaces that protected the community from urban encroachment—were "naturally" healthier in relation to the ravages of the Victorian urban maelstrom, and believed they could bring such nostalgic visions of the pre-industrial bucolic to material fruition through modern town planning. In short, they believed the garden city would improve the social, cultural, as well as physical health of the urban working class by providing pre-designed spaces to nurture lives, practices, and social relations that were framed by a closer relationship with a particular rendition of "nature". For us, any examination of garden cities necessarily involves a cultural history of body and environmental politics as much as a history of urban planning and design. Hence, within the remainder of this commentary, we offer insights into how the garden city movement was shaped by Howard's and the planners' biopolitical agenda, as they sought to constitute "naturally healthy" spaces of living designed to ameliorate the deficiencies of urban working class bodies and cultures.

2. Garden City Biopolitics

While it may be overlooked in its contemporaneous iterations, from its inception the garden city incorporated a biopolitics prefigured on the liberation of urban working class bodies from the debilitating shackles of urban industrialization, through their prescribed relocation to planned communities balancing "town" and "country" life. When Howard envisioned a community that could unite the cultural amenities of urban life with the "natural healthfulness of the country" (1898, p. 9), he drew from a socially constructed vision of healthy, "civilized" cultural habits and a bourgeois English nostalgia for pastoral spaces, housing, and social arrangements (Meacham, 1999). Evoking Western, Christian mythology of "nature" as a feminized "Garden of Eden" (Merchant, 2003), Howard wrote the countryside was nature's "bosom," a source of "all health, all wealth, all knowledge." In contrast, the industrial city, with its "social opportunities," "places of amusement," and employment, provided inadequate sunlight and fresh air, overcrowded, unsanitary, and expensive housing, and little opportunity for "healthy" interaction with countryside spaces (1898, pp. 7–10). Victorian reformers, fearful that the physical and social "degeneration" of urban workers would undermine British imperial power (Thorsheim, 2006), embraced and promoted Howard's garden city, arguing it was a spatial palliative for returning urban dwellers to the traditional, "healthy" pastoral spaces of British imperial mythology. In this way, the garden city movement emerged during a period in which "the biological manipulation of human bodies" (Shea, 2010, p. 153) became increasingly integral to the political agendas of Western reformers keen to "civilize" and discipline (Foucault, 1995)

the workers of their overcrowded, unsanitary, unhealthy industrial urban centers. The garden city would mitigate these deleterious effects of industrial capitalism and provide urban workers with the essentials for a healthy life, simultaneously defusing the discontentments impelling contemporary radical labor movements.

Early twentieth century advocates of English garden cities exhibited a paternalist and benevolent approach to working class health that was, at least partially, imbued with a racial nationalism preoccupied with the preservation of British imperial strength. This Anglo-Saxon elite (comprising prominent liberal members of Parliament, British nobles, and industrialists) believed the "degenerating"/degeneration of urban working class health to be detrimental to the overall "health" of the British Empire. At the groundbreaking of the first English garden city at Letchworth, the Right Honourable Earl Grey proclaimed garden cities would stymie the "evil" plaguing British national body politic: the "ill regulated and anarchic growth" of Britain's large cities, and its "sapping" of "the strength and poisoning the character of the Nation." Workers could now be removed from the "squalid and depressing monotony" of the urban "sunless slums," and resettled onto garden cities with "civilized" recreation and an "organised influence to mould" young British men "into honest citizenship…" (First Garden City Limited, 1903). Because it provided access to "naturally healthy" traditional English rural and open spaces in conjunction with "civilized" recreational and cultural activities, elite supporters promoted the garden city as an important instrument for physically, culturally, and socially "civilizing" urban dwellers through what amounted to the paternalist regulation of working class bodies and habits. The garden city was part of their overall biopolitical agenda for preserving the racial and moral vitality of the British Empire.

The biopolitics of urban and community design is not a new discussion for urban planners and architects (Aggregate, 2012; Hauptmann, Neidich, & Angelidakis, 2010; Wallenstein, 2009). There is a still-developing canon of theoretically-nuanced scholarship pertaining to the institutional maintenance and regulation of bodies in modern societies (Rose, 2007; Foucault, 2008; Lemke, 2011). Yet, rarely is the history of garden cities framed or studied in terms of the planners' implicit biopolitical objectives: as "a spatial machine that would render and regulate human sociality" and bodies "towards particular—governmental—ends." (Osborne & Rose, 1999, p. 748). Historians and scholars place great emphasis on the fact that Howard, and garden city planners such as Sir Raymond Unwin, were social reformers influenced by radical ideas of British and American socialist and anti-capitalist thinkers (such as William Morris, John Ruskin, Edward Carpenter and Edward Bellamy; Buder, 1990). Howard and early inspired planners, however, routinely spoke of the garden city as a strategy for regulating and remaking the everyday activities of residents by resettling them into a prescribed community form that would structure

"healthier" social relations through provisions such as access to "open spaces" and parks. The problematic inferences to eugenics doctrine in Howard's original depiction of the garden city, and the model's subsequent incorporation in the racial hygiene programs of Nazi Germany (Voigt, 1989; Fehl, 1992), illustrate the entrenched biopolitical elements of garden city ideals. Only by placing the history of the garden city in conversation with theories of biopolitics and modern biopower can we begin to see how the garden city movement discourse was based on an idealization of "healthy bodies" molded by the planners' cultural definitions of health, nature, and bourgeois perceptions of urban working class bodies.

Revisiting the biopolitical dimensions of garden city history allows for a more nuanced understanding of the inherent class politics entailed in contemporary garden city boosterism. Recently, the Town and Country Planning Association—originally founded by Ebenezer Howard as the Garden City Association—called for the British Government to guarantee affordable housing at the newly planned garden city at Ebbsfleet. The organization asserted that Ebenezer Howard's original garden city principles demand "genuinely affordable housing for all budgets" (Booth, 2014). Yet, from the early years of Letchworth Garden City's development, the planners encountered strong criticism from local laborers who objected to the more expensive, bourgeois aesthetics of the community's houses. Letchworth planner Raymond Unwin, for example, stipulated the houses be built using materials that could restore what he called an "organic unity" between dwelling and the surrounding environment. A deeply nostalgic believer in the natural healthfulness of pre-industrial architecture, Unwin demanded that building aspects as minute as roofing tiles were necessary for the social and biological health of the community. When he mandated that expensive red clay tiles be the only roofing material used in Letchworth, local laborers protested that they should be able to use grey slates, a cheaper roofing material commonly found on urban tenements at the time. Unwin, however, retorted that the advantages in using red tiles outweighed the difference in cost, for they contributed to a "healthy," necessary "unity of effect" between house and countryside ("Artistic Problems," 1906). In his planning of Letchworth Garden City, installing the correct conditions for his vision of healthy living supplanted the initial affordability of community housing. Thus, as renowned British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1989) wrote, garden cities "followed a town planning path well-trodden by the middle and upper class suburbs of the period" (p. 167), resulting in a community whose social opportunities and spatial arrangements exacerbated class conflict.

3. Conclusion

In summary, we believe the garden city should be considered less as a reformist model promising sustainable housing and living arrangements, and more an endur-

ing built environment form that emerged as a paternalist strategy for the maintenance of people's bodies and the reproduction of capitalist social and spatial relations. If contemporary planners and architects want to engage with the garden city model in terms of its utility in creating more humane, equitable, and environmentally sustainable living environments in this ecologically turbulent epoch of the "Anthropocene" (Angus, 2016), they must first come to terms with its deep historical links to problematic idealizations of "healthy bodies," and its function as a spatial blueprint for the regulation and maintenance of particular forms of embodied living. Only then can we initiate productive conversations on the garden city's role in the creation of inclusive communities that respect, rather than regulate, a multiplicity of sustainable modes of living and interacting with surrounding environments.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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