



Green spaces, blue spaces: garden cities re-thought?

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Over 100 years ago Ebenezer Howard had a new and ideal vision as to how people should live. His vision was to draw together the three magnets of what he considered essential for a modern way of living, combining the benefits of the city, the countryside and the people. In establishing the ideal of the Garden City, Howard set the scene for the then forthcoming town and country planning acts.

Key to these garden cities was that there would be the tenets of a new civilisation – a decent place to live, green open spaces and cultural facilities such as clubs, allotments and workplaces that offered then innovative things like annual leave from work. Employees moved in because they liked the ethos, residents moved in because rents for family housing were affordable (housing designed around working class incomes) and communities emerged because there was something about the layout and facilities enabled the development and sustainability of a new community, and one that relied on a concept of common ‘ownership’ and purpose.

The first Garden City at Letchworth in 1903 in Hertfordshire was followed in the 1920s by Welwyn Garden City, set to be a satellite town. Both have provided enormous impetus to subsequent thinking about how we should live. From 1906 Garden Suburbs, for example at Hampstead and Ealing, brought the benefits of planning and design into urban areas and protected green spaces.

The influence can be seen in many interwar and post second world war cottage or housing estates to the London periphery: South Oxhey, for example, was a post war (then) London County Council estate built in the countryside near to Watford and offering quality housing in well designed layouts, with local shops, transport links, community venues and places of worship.

Later came the new cities. With a need for further development, new cities such as Milton Keynes from the later 1960s were conceived. Following the American grid system, each new neighbourhood took its form within a block of roads and roundabouts, taking forward the idea of the garden city into a new era where – by now – the car was king. Although careful layouts sought to encourage lifestyles activity and exercise and a less polluting transport, the extent to which these are used as opposed to car driving is unclear. It is difficult to put the car owning and driving genie back into the bottle.

In many ways the new city of Milton Keynes can be seen as a success. It is a popular place to live (for all ages) and work with much good housing stock in appealing neighbourhoods. It has a city centre with numerous shops and leisure facilities and its concrete cows seems something of the distant past. People don't just live here for green parks and blue water spaces, but they also come here for those. These nature, leisure and social venues help surely contribute to exercise and activity.

At Ebbsfleet, Dartford, we are seeing the emergence of another modern form branded a Garden City. It is marketed as a place for new homes, local employment, green spaces and good infrastructure where people will want to live, work and bring up families.

Green spaces and blue spaces are well researched and established as important contributors to health and wellbeing both objectively and subjectively. They are places we can rest and relax, take exercise, meet with friends and make new friends; enjoy some fresh air and the out of doors.

Howard's vision still contributes to how we think about the elements required in good living environments and can continue to be factored into existing as well as new developments, contributing at least in part to public health and wellbeing. One hundred plus years on, we are looking at a renaissance of garden cities and the government's healthy new towns initiative also provides an opportunity to create not only ideal communities but ideal homes.

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