

To rejuvenate the garden city we must intensify its existing footprint

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The 21st-century revival of Ebenezer Howard's radical vision too often translates into low-density, car-based development, argues *Roland Karthaus* of Matter Architecture

The garden city was Ebenezer Howard's radical vision for a new kind of settlement providing the best of the town and the country and fit for the future. Throughout most of the 20th century, garden city principles proved remarkably resilient but were finally undermined by rapid post-war growth in car ownership and the loss of city land and development powers.

Letchworth, the first garden city and subject of a [recent RIBA-run competition](#), is a case in point: physically, economically and socially divided, the conservation of its aesthetic heritage is fiercely guarded, while the original principles of community ownership, green infrastructure, greenbelt protection, local facilities and sustainable transport have withered on the vine. The competition brief was for a peripheral site for new homes and facilities. Through my practice Matter Architecture's entry, we argued that the garden city could only be rejuvenated by intensifying within its existing footprint.

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The current, 21st-century revival of interest in garden cities initially appeared promising, but too often has turned out to mean low-density, car-based development, with limited facilities, public transport, ecology and weak stewardship.

Ebbsfleet, the first of this new wave of garden towns, was criticised for failing to deliver either the quantity or quality of homes promised. The first phases are indistinguishable from standard volume-housebuilder developments. The more recent Healthy City initiative is now seeking to assert a stronger vision for Ebbsfleet, but it was an inauspicious start. The garden city programme was further expanded to include a series of garden villages, stretching the terminology – many of the key 'garden' principles are reliant on the critical mass and density of a town.

In Harlow & Gilston Garden Town, East Hertfordshire, a series of village-type settlements surrounding the original garden town of Harlow is planned. In this case an overarching plan aims to knit these settlements into a metropolitan area with Harlow at its centre. This is a more sophisticated and strategic approach, endeavouring to bring together urban regeneration and new development, but there are stiff challenges delivering a vision across authority boundaries of diverse constituencies, without the powers of a single development corporation or authority.

When [*Garden Cities of To-morrow*](#) was originally published in 1902, no one anticipated the exponential growth in private motor vehicles. The modest densities that may have been suitable nearly 120 years ago now struggle to support public transport, local facilities and services, while maintenance budgets are spread too thinly over fragmented urban green spaces. The right place to build new homes is inside these towns, where their underlying structures can be uncovered and renewed much more effectively than new infrastructure can be created. But this approach isn't as attention-grabbing as a new town or settlement, and it requires significant dexterity and long-term commitment.

I grew up in a village and fully understand the attractions of rural life, but I'm equally aware of how tenuous public services and transport are in many rural areas. Passing my driving test was literally life-changing. Fairfield Park outside Letchworth is a mature example of a modern garden village, planned in the distinctive radial pattern, but with consistently Victorian pastiche architecture. It has a local Tesco, a school and a bus and a general sense of idyll; but it is fundamentally too low-density and isolated to fully deliver on garden city principles. Rural life is a valid choice, but we desperately need to support and intensify existing settlements, rather than simply build new ones.

While in some quarters, garden city principles are being taken seriously, in others it is clear that only the aesthetics and language are of interest – as a cover for business-as-usual. If we ever manage to deliver the quantities of housing we need, we will rue the consequences if they are planned, designed and built on this outdated model.

The recent debate around the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission revealed how architects are all too eager to debate aesthetics when the real issue is that the design of so many new housing developments is entrenching unsustainable and life-limiting lifestyles. Architects and planners should be working together to reassert the radical principles of garden cities to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow – not last century – as Howard would have done.

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