

Garden City Suburbs

*A noted architect discusses a
neglected form of urban planning.*

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AS AN ARCHITECT, I am principally concerned with the form of our cities, both the design of the public realm and of the buildings that define it. But it is not enough to shape cities—our cities need to be orchestrated to address the contradictory social and economic conditions that define modern democratic life. I am convinced that at the core of American town planning lies a grand yet undervalued, 150-year-old tradition, that of the garden city suburb. The garden city suburb tradition can enrich our cities today, not only by providing planning strategies and formal inspiration, but also by reconnecting what we do with the

broader social currents that we must engage with as city-builders.

The garden city suburb was a remarkable achievement, deeply engaged in development economics, social issues, and civic reform. In the post-World War II era, it was demonized by modernist architects and planners who questioned its middle-class values. This is ironic, given that the great modernist architects and planners of the 1920s and 1930s, who had a genuine interest in social reform that benefited the working class, absorbed much of the garden city suburb tradition into their own work. For example, one of the French architect Le Corbusier's earliest projects was a conventional garden suburb in Normandy—very bourgeois in tone. But even after Le Corbusier found his mature artistic voice, although his architecture was transformed by the machine-derived aesthetic he felt best expressed a new social order, his planning ideas remained rooted in the *cit  jardin*. The persistence of the garden city suburb type can also be seen in the housing work of other modernists such as Mies van der Rohe, Ernst May, and Martin Wagner.

What is a garden city suburb? In its original version, the garden city suburb was a comprehensively planned, green residential district consisting of single-family and multi-family housing. While it was sometimes located at some distance from a city, it was almost never independ-

ent of the city. In the last half century, however, we have lost almost all sense of the great tradition of the planned garden city suburb. What we have now in the way of urban and suburban development is what the architect Rem Koolhaas has cynically but accurately called "junk space"—not neighborhoods or towns but zones of development in a sea of sprawl. In contrast, the garden city suburb was intensely involved with urban problems. If one looks beyond the shaded streets and appealing house types of garden suburbs, one sees that these developments embodied complex social relationships. Planned suburban towns were the product of developers and architects acting together as a holistic urban community and working to meet both the material and the spiritual needs of people—trying to forge a new kind of metropolitan community with plans broad enough to allow for both country and city, and for many classes of people.

SUBWAY SUBURB

My interest in garden suburbs was sparked in the 1970s, when I was researching a book on the Philadelphia architect George Howe. I was taken on a tour of Chestnut Hill, an old garden city suburb of Philadelphia where Howe and his partners built many fine houses in the 1920s.

Chestnut Hill proved to be my Rosetta stone. Located just within the boundaries of Philadelphia, nestled between the historic settlement of Germantown and the forests of Fairmount Park, Chestnut Hill combines a splendid sense of isolation with convenient access via railroad to the center of the city of which it has always been a part. It was incorporated into the city in 1854, the same year that the Chestnut Hill Railroad began service from Philadelphia. Henry Howard Houston, a director of the Pennsylvania Railroad, was an inspired entrepreneur who recognized that suburban train stations could become the loci around which recreational centers and residential development would naturally take place. His son-in-law, Dr. George Woodward, who was seriously involved with the English garden suburb movement, carried on Houston's work in the years leading up to World War II, so that in this city, from 1854 to the mid-1930s, Chestnut Hill was developed as one of the great exemplars of an in-city garden suburb enclave connected by rapid transit to the central business district just twenty minutes away. Houston did not have a strong architectural vision, but Woodward did, and he commissioned many different architects who, working with the local stone, created a local vernacular rooted in Cotswold England and Norman France.

In 1976, I was invited to join six other American architects as representatives of

the United States at the first-ever architectural exhibition at the Venice Biennale. I persuaded my colleagues to unite our individual presentations behind the theme of the suburb. This was done because most of us—the group included Peter Eisenman and Stanley Tigerman—had never designed anything much bigger than a suburban house and because the American suburb was so completely opposite to the tradition of European urbanism. My theoretical project for the 1976 Venice Biennale was called “Subway Suburb.”

Subway Suburb was not about the flight from the inner city to the suburbs that characterized the post-World War II scene. Quite the opposite, it called for the introduction of the garden suburb type into those areas of the central cities where the prevailing mode of redevelopment—the disconnected vertical garden cities of towers in the park—had clearly failed. Subway Suburb was an attempt to take back the garden city suburb movement from the modernists who had so transformed it that it was no longer recognizable or meaningful. The hypothetical site was in the most socially and physically devastated area of New York City: Brownsville, the East New York section of Brooklyn. But it could have been set in Detroit, St. Louis, Boston, or Philadelphia, all equally in need of a new model for rebuilding. The project mixed high-style formal elements such as

Regency crescents with the vernacular of working-class cottages in a plan that recognized the value of the existing streets and the utilities buried underneath them, and took advantage of available rail transportation, and proximity to the central city and its jobs.

Subway Suburb revived the garden city suburb tradition, but because it proposed to do so as a means of reclaiming the burned-out areas at the edges of our inner cities, the proposal redirected what had been dismissed as a socially irrelevant phenomenon—the planned garden suburb—and put it to work as a model for rebuilding the devastated wastelands of socially troubled inner cities. Subway Suburb was not about edge city, or the open country, or sprawl. Nor was it about upper-middle-class dreams of arcadia. In fact, it corrected a fundamental misconception of the garden city suburb type. Classic garden city suburb enclaves such as Hampstead Garden Suburb in London, or at Forest Hills Gardens in Queens, New York, were built within the confines of the city and cannot be understood apart from the cities that form their larger setting. Subway Suburb was conceived at a time when the devastation of American inner cities was the focus of national attention, a time when doom-and-gloom despair was accompanied by little in the way of creative thinking about how to repair the damage. The proposal was practical and

theoretical: it addressed the urgent need to rebuild the city—not to escape from it.

In a 1978 article in *Architectural Record*, I argued that a long-overdue look at the garden city suburb type could supply much-needed models for the redevelopment of the vast, virtually empty urban wastelands that lie between the inner cores of our cities and the suburbs beyond in what I called the “middle city.” The point was that new suburbs should be built where they were—and still are—really needed, not in the remote rural reaches beyond the outer city, but in the inner cities where the existing network of roads, rapid transit, and utilities are all in place, and where the sudden availability of land with no evident higher use makes it possible to introduce this remarkable, time-tested urban model to meet the needs of the lower middle class and the poor.

In the mid-1980s, the New York State Urban Development Corporation transformed Charlotte Street in the Bronx into Charlotte Gardens. Charlotte Gardens was an urban wasteland that, thanks to leading politicians including presidents Carter and Reagan, became the national poster child of urban decay. But the UDC’s project was a travesty of the garden city suburb idea: prefabricated suburban houses, grouped in an extremely low-density enclave. Nevertheless, Charlotte Gardens had a powerful effect, leading to the dramatic revitalization of the entire South Bronx.

The success of this poorly conceived initiative paved the way for the many, much better Hope VI projects of the 1990s.

My work on Subway Suburb made me recognize that there was a lost history of planning that needed to be rediscovered for contemporary practice. In 1981, working with John Massengale, I wrote *The Anglo-American Suburb*, which was published as a special edition of the British journal *Architectural Design*. A slender handbook, it all too briefly surveyed two centuries of planned suburban towns. It included many garden suburbs built specifically for industrial workers, such as: Pullman, Illinois; Kohler, Wisconsin; Tyrone, New Mexico; and

Yorkship Village, Camden, New Jersey. The long tradition of building garden suburbs for industrial workers is a reminder that the garden suburb movement of a hundred years ago had a social conscience. This seems to be missing in today's so-called neotraditional town movement, whose main achievements are geared to the tastes and sensibilities of upper-middle-class Americans.

CELEBRATION

After a 15-year hiatus, my involvement with the traditional town movement began once again with Celebration,



Smith Aerial Photography for Robert A.M. Stern Architects

Celebration, Florida

Florida, which was planned from 1987 on, in partnership with Jaquelin Robertson. Celebration owes a great debt to Seaside, the first modern project to revive the garden city suburb model. When Michael Eisner, CEO of the Walt Disney Company, visited Seaside, the decision whether or not to build Celebration was being debated at the company's highest levels. As a result of his visit, Eisner sensed the magnitude of impact that a large project in the tradition of planned garden suburb town could have, not only on contemporary real estate development but also on contemporary urban life.

Seaside is an 80-acre resort village; Celebration is a town—10,000 acres, of which 5,000 acres are dedicated open space. Seaside is not near a city; Celebration is ten miles south of downtown Orlando. In planning Celebration, we learned from Seaside but we had to go much further. Celebration had to prove that it would be possible to successfully develop a new garden city suburb for year-round living—that the ideas of the new urbanism were suitable not only for the select few on vacation but for the many who seek a good balance between country and city life on a day-to-day basis.

The idea that an ideal planned town should be part of Disney's property in central Florida had been articulated by Walt Disney in 1966. He envisioned a "city of the future," but Celebration was

very different from Walt Disney's futuristic vision. On 5,000 developable acres, Celebration houses 9,000 people and provides jobs for thousands more in offices, hospitals, schools, and shops. Celebration is a rare case of a large planned garden suburb town; the only comparable development is the Country Club district of Kansas City, developed by J.C. Nichols from 1907 to 1930. Celebration belongs to a long tradition of planned garden city suburbs that began with Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's Riverside, Illinois, of 1869. But—and this is crucial—it is equally rooted in traditional American urbanism as a whole. The design of Celebration draws on some of the most successful American towns—not only planned towns, but just as significantly towns that evolved naturally, like East Hampton, New York, and Charleston, South Carolina—towns that have met the tests of time.

U R B A N S C A L E

I do not believe that today's planners and architects have done enough to translate the garden city suburb to an urban scale. Smart growth and neotraditional development have largely focused on exurban land development—which is understandable from the point of view of the marketplace.

But there is increasing evidence that re-settlement of the inner cities is the trend of the future. There are some notable high-density examples of traditional neighborhood town planning that suggest that the garden city suburb principles can work at big-city scale, not just a village or town scale. I am familiar with Battery Park City, for example, having worked on various detailed plans for its neighborhoods, and two apartment houses at its north end. Battery Park City is a large complex of apartments, hotels, office buildings, and educational institutions along the Hudson River in Lower Manhattan. Much of it is built on landfill that came from the excavation for the World Trade Center.

Battery Park City is an example of a vertical garden suburb. Because it is a part of the city yet also apart from it, Battery Park City is not and has never been the darling of the critics, who object to the restrained vernacular of its architecture and to the fact that the development is somewhat isolated from the city as a whole. Ironically, these critics dismiss it as “suburban,” as if that was the worst thing possible. Yet Battery Park City succeeds, because of a coherent plan that combines gridded streets that reflect Manhattan street patterns and connect to them where feasible, and because it has a network of green open spaces threaded through it, and because it offers a rich mix of community experiences within its



Aveq Fotografie

New market square at Musiskwartier, Arnhem, the Netherlands

own confines. It is a late-twentieth-century answer to Hampstead Garden Suburb and Forest Hills Gardens of a hundred years ago.

Musiskwartier is a project by my firm in Arnhem, the Netherlands. The development transforms key blocks in the formerly industrial part of the city through the creation of a market square surrounded by new buildings incorporating ground-floor retail with residential space above. At Arnhem, a large amount of retail, including big-box uses, fit into the lower two floors, the cellar, and underneath the new plaza. The top floors are residential, bringing urban liveliness to this formerly under-utilized neighborhood. Planted rooftop courtyards pro-

vide quiet spaces above the retail sections and behind the apartment buildings.

We are also doing a project in Philadelphia that embraces the garden city suburb ideal. The 1,000-acre old Navy Yard, comparable in size to Center City Philadelphia, lies three and a half miles south of City Hall at the foot of the historic Broad Street axis. The Philadelphia Navy Yard has six miles of waterfront along the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers, and includes almost 200 historic buildings. The development is a public-private partnership of the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation and developer Liberty Property Trust/Synterra Partners. The master plan includes a mixed-use community of office, residential, institu-



Dick Sneyers for Robert A.M. Stern Architects

Plan for the redevelopment of the Philadelphia Navy Yard, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

tional, research and development, retail, and recreation uses. The plan establishes a clear hierarchy of streets and a variety of public spaces including twenty-seven acres of wetlands. The development emphasizes sustainable design, with programs for mass transit, stormwater retention and filtering, and sustainable design standards for new construction. Studies are under way to extend the Broad Street subway line to the site's heart and perhaps in the future a link to PATCO, the regional commuter trains that connect Philadelphia with Camden, New Jersey, across the river.

Projects like the Navy Yard and Arnheim have been governed by six principles that we first developed in collaboration with Tibor Kalman for our work together on the revitalization of the theater block of New York's 42nd Street. I think they have validity for all urban projects.

One: "Layering" reveals generations of previous development, in which new has been grafted onto old, creating a conversation across time of styles, scales, and materials.

Two: "Unplanning" creates visual diversity by encouraging individualistic expressions among buildings to play against any uniform or coordinated system and discourage simplistic "theming" or the imposition of a single taste over the variety that evolves in an unplanned community.

Three: "Contradiction and Surprise" provide the exuberance that lies at the

heart of any city, the natural result of many entrepreneurs and designers competing to stand out in a crowd.

Four: "Pedestrian Experience" discourages long, uninterrupted building masses by specifying frequent entrances, whether they be retail shops or front doors to houses, porches, and so on.

Five: "Visual Anchors" draw people regardless of their economic or social background, stopping them in their tracks and pulling them in from surrounding neighborhoods.

Six: "Aesthetics as Attractions," which are essential to creating a sense of place, encourages a design virtuosity similar to that seen at a World's Fair, so that visitors will feel compelled to send postcards home. Just as we need coherent neighborhoods, we need isolated monuments.

CONCLUSION

I started my suburban journey in 1975—not wanting to aid and abet the sprawl of American settlement, but with the intention of returning to life the devastated wastelands of the areas just beyond the central business districts of our cities. I am convinced that the lessons of the garden city suburbs are more important than ever before and ought to be applied to cities. Along the way, the new urbanism movement must live up to its name; it should

move from the fringe to the core. It must take on more than the single-family house and the occasional neighborhood retail center. It must discourage the endless swallowing up of greenfields, eschewing isolated new villages or towns no matter how well-planned. The traditional town planning must instead devote the power of its rhetoricians and the talents of its practitioners to the problems of the city. It must embrace inner-city life.

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