

THE ORIGINS AND ETHOS OF WELWYN GARDEN CITY

Welwyn Garden City is the second and arguably the most successful of the garden cities created by the social reformer Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928). His book *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898) outlined a vision for a gentle urban transformation of England. His call for sociable and economically viable cities led to Letchworth Garden City in Hertfordshire in 1903, and Welwyn Garden City (WGC), also in Herts, from 1919. Hugely influential in British town planning, both Welwyn and Letchworth Garden Cities have also been adopted across the world as templates for new community planning.

Calling for socially mixed and balanced and self-contained new communities where both local employment and social and cultural institutions provided for a dynamic town life, Howard's vision was one of many utopian reactions to the overcrowding, criminality and insanitary conditions of the unplanned nineteenth-century city. Instead of crammed-together housing, which was often situated many miles from the factories and offices, he advocated for lower-density homes with gardens, with neighbourhood facilities, in tree-lined streets and roads all at a convenient distance from the town centre and workplaces. Long before the environmental movement came into existence, this was a forward-looking even 'green' townscape in which nature and an aversion towards commuting were harmonized.

The centre of Welwyn Garden City today remains an elegant testimony to Howard's vision. This is thanks to The *Plan for Welwyn Garden City*, completed by the architect-planner Louis de Soissons in 1920. During the 1920s and 1930s, under the active guidance of Welwyn Garden City Ltd, WGC became an urban masterpiece of humane, low-rise, integrated planning. Graced with beautiful neo-Georgian homes, public buildings, retail, religious and recreational spaces, the garden city also keenly embraced modernity and experimentation in urban design. The iconic Shredded Wheat factory and other interwar buildings are testament to the harmonious fusion of modernity with garden-city style town planning.

After Welwyn Garden City was designated as a new town following the Second World War, de Soissons built upon the achievements of the 1920s and 1930s with a further major plan in 1950. WGC evolved and expanded over subsequent decades, keeping true to its original design principles while continuing to experiment with new housing styles and residential layouts. In common with the original pioneers of the 1920s and 1930s, settlers to WGC in the post war years enjoyed well-designed homes with gardens, or low-rise apartment blocks that enhanced the green spaces in which they were situated. Howard's vision for the garden city had more than proved its adaptability and popularity during the twentieth century.

Welwyn Garden City must hold closely to the principles advocated so passionately by Howard in his book:

" The people of the Garden City will not for a moment permit the beauty of their city to be destroyed by the process of growth.....The town will grow; but it will grow in accordance with a principle which will result in this - that such growth shall not lessen or destroy, but ever add to its social opportunities, to its beauty, to its convenience."

He went on to argue:

"it is essential that there should be unity of design and purpose—that the town should be planned as a whole, and not left to grow up in a chaotic manner as has been the case with all English towns.A town, like a flower, or a tree, or an animal, should, at each stage of its growth, possess unity, symmetry, completeness, and the effect of growth should never be to destroy that unity, but to give it greater purpose, nor to mar that symmetry, but to make it more symmetrical; while the completeness of the early structure should be merged in the yet greater completeness of the later development".

The incursion of large-scale new developments with no such grounding in all its aspects - green space, amenity, layout, scale, mass, bulk, design - will radically undermine the fundamental character of the garden city. It is utterly imperative that such a pioneering global influencer in town design as WGC continues to evolve to tried and trusted and much-loved garden city principles. To lose sight of Howard's vision is to betray WGC and its heritage, both for its current citizens, and for future generations. It will also destroy WGC's allure on the world stage as a model for humane town planning. The future is clear: the future is the legacy that Howard bequeathed.

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