

# Introduction: The Past in the Present

The garden city movement had a tremendous impact on Norwegian architecture and planning in the first half of the 20th century, spawning a number of garden cities across the entire country, from the mountains to the lowlands, from the inland to the coast. Surprisingly little has been written about these settlements, with the exception of a few solitary studies.<sup>1</sup> One small book cannot possibly make reparation for this neglect. My aim is to create a basic overview of the different types of garden cities and discuss some of the topics that they encompass. But before I introduce the key themes, there is a need for a brief definition of the garden city.

The garden city is in some ways similar to other green settlements like garden villages, garden suburbs and garden resorts, most notably through a close focus on landscape cultivation and a strong element of utopianism. Green utopias typically aspire to improve life quality.<sup>2</sup> What separates the garden city formula from the others is the ambition of self-sufficient, autonomous cities.<sup>3</sup> In reality, however, this rarely happened. Among the Norwegian examples in this book, only Rjukan can be called a self-sufficient town based on garden city principles. In fact, there were no precise distinctions between garden cities, garden suburbs and garden villages in Norwegian planning and architecture in the interwar period. They were simply called garden cities regardless of size, location

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- 1 Most of the existing reference material is focused on individual examples, particularly Ullevål Garden City [Ullevål Hageby], for example, Anne Fogt, Siri Meier and Anne Ullmann, *Ullevål Hageby Gjennom 90 år – Fra Bolignød til Kardemomme By* (Oslo: Unipax, 2007), and Elisabeth Synnøve Roaas, “Ullevål Hageby – Verdienes Landskap” (Master’s thesis, University of Oslo, 2016).
  - 2 Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs, “Nature, Utopia and the Garden,” in *Earth Perfect. Nature, Utopia and the Garden*, eds. Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012), 7.
  - 3 Robert A.M. Stern, David Fishman and Jacob Tilove, *Paradise Planned. The Garden Suburb and the Modern City* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2013), 203.

and design.<sup>4</sup> Most of the Norwegian garden cities did, however, have a local center with shops and other services. They were rarely monofunctional at the time of their original conception. This sets them apart from straight housing projects.

At a more detailed level, the decisive ingredients are public health, social life, industrial and agricultural productivity, and specific ownership models. Dugald MacFadyen has described it thus: “A Garden City is a town designed for healthy living and industry, of a size which makes possible a full social life, but not larger: surrounded by a rural belt: the whole of the land being in public ownership or held in trust for the community.”<sup>5</sup> The community aspect is essential, as is the issue of class. The majority of Norwegian garden cities were planned for the working classes. This ideal came from the movement’s founding father, Ebenezer Howard, as well as a social movement in Norway called *Egne Hjem* [A home of one’s own], which in many ways was the start of social housing as a modern phenomenon in Norway.<sup>6</sup> The concern for common people’s everyday life and the societal responsibility to help those in need were pivotal.

A major downside, however, is that garden cities often excluded their intended residents in economic terms. As reports of the period and recent research suggest, those who needed them the most, the unskilled labor force at the bottom of the working-class segment, only gained limited access to Norwegian garden cities. Even examples like Lille Tøyen Garden City, where many of the residents were workers, did not house the poorest. As time has gone by and garden cities on the fringes of bigger cities have been engulfed by urban development, they have become enormously attractive. As a housing advertisement from February 2021 illustrates, such garden city neighborhoods have now

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4 Morten Bing and Espen Johnsen, “Innledning: Nye Hjem i Mellomkrigstiden,” in *Nye Hjem. Bomiljøer i Mellomkrigstiden*, eds. Morten Bing and Espen Johnsen (Oslo: Norsk Folkemuseums Årbok, 1998), 20.

5 Dugald MacFadyen, *Sir Ebenezer Howard and the Town Planning Movement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), 109.

6 This thesis is a solid study of *Egne Hjem*: Mona Nielsen, “‘Med Hjem Skal Landet Bygges.’ Egne Hjem og Hagebybevegelsen i Norge. Utdrag fra Boligsakens Historie” (master’s thesis, University of Bergen, 1984).

been taken over by an increasingly wealthy segment of the population.<sup>7</sup> To have a “beautiful townhouse with a large garden”, as the advertisement promises, has become a luxury that relatively few can afford. This was not the case 30 years ago.<sup>8</sup> Whether this means that the garden city movement failed from the start in social terms or went astray later is one of the questions I will be discussing along the way. Or perhaps we are still waiting for the perfect delivery of Ebenezer Howard’s vision?

Another key theme is the town–country relation imbedded in the concept of garden cities, as proposed by Howard in *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Social Reform* (1898) and the revised edition *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (1902).<sup>9</sup> The town–country duality is both a bond and an opposition, depending on how the garden city is defined and conceived, and the context in which it occurs. Its adoption into Norwegian practice will therefore be discussed in light of previous studies of the garden city heritage,<sup>10</sup> comparing the international principles with the application across Norway. Since the competition between urban and rural areas in Norway is a huge topic, I shall limit myself to the impact of garden cities on the edges of existing cities, where urban and rural environments clashed in the 1920s and ’30s. It is, by definition, impossible to live in a big city and outside it at the same time, but the garden city formula seems to insist that the ultimate compromise is achievable. Does it glue the urban and the rural together or increase the tension between them?

In recent decades, the garden city has been criticized for its decentralizing, suburbanizing effect in large cities. The compact city has

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7 “Lille Tøyen Hageby”, finn.no, February 28, 2021, <https://www.bolig.ai/no/adresse/ansgar-sørliens-vei-55-oslo-285667294/1929799>.

8 The working-class character was still present then, according to this account: Ingar Arneberg, *Lille Tøyen – Arbeidernes Hageby* (Oslo: Self-published, 1990).

9 Ebenezer Howard, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Social Reform* (London: Routledge, 2003), and Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1902).

10 Stephen V. Ward, ed., *Garden City: Past, Present, and Future* (London: Spon, 1992); Stanley Buder, *Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Walter L. Creese. *The Search for the Environment: The Garden City – Before and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

been perceived as an antidote.<sup>11</sup> For proponents of the compact city, the garden city is a symbol of outdated ideals: a pastoral indulgence that ought to be abolished. Other scholars challenge that verdict by identifying the deficiencies of the compact city. Michael Neuman calls attention to the “compact city paradox,” which he describes like this: “For a city to be sustainable, the argument goes, functions and population must be concentrated at higher densities. For a city to be livable, functions and population must be dispersed at lower densities.”<sup>12</sup> This could be rephrased as “the garden city paradox” in light of how popular such neighborhoods are. Yesterday’s urban suburbia has become a gold standard that may or may not be good for the city of today, depending on the viewpoint. In Norway, this gold standard is strongly connected to a fundamental affinity for timber architecture, preferably a single-family house, as I will reveal in the section that deals with the domestication of English garden city architecture.

Another issue of great urgency is the ongoing discussion on urban gardens, those pockets of rural agriculture in the city. Up until recently, the main emphasis has been on urban trends, like roof-top gardening and the general quest of creating more green spaces within densely populated districts.<sup>13</sup> Now the radar is honing in on everyday gardens as ecological resources in their own right. Books like *Garden and Climate*, *Designing the Sustainable Site* and *Garden Revolution*,<sup>14</sup> building on classics like *Nature in Cities*,<sup>15</sup> are examples of this development, which is an important framework in the section of this book that deals

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11 Michael Neuman, “The Compact City Fallacy,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 24, no. 1 (September 2005): 12.

12 Neuman, 16.

13 This book is a good example: Anna Yudina, *Garden City: Supergreen Buildings, Urban Skyscrapers and the New Planted Space* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017).

14 Chip Sullivan, *Garden and Climate* (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 2003); Heather L. Venhaus, *Designing the Sustainable Site: Integrated Design Strategies for Small Scale Sites and Residential Landscapes* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2012); and Larry Weaner, *Garden Revolution: How Our Landscapes Can Be a Source of Environmental Change* (Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 2016).

15 Ian C. Laurie, ed. *Nature in Cities: The Natural Environment in the Design and Development of Urban Green Space* (Chichester, New York, Brisbane and Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1979).

with the garden city's green legacy. To some, the garden is a savior in both environmental and social terms: a generator of biodiversity and green welfare.<sup>16</sup> To others, it is an unnecessary luxury that should be utilized for more buildings.

The politics and ethics of these debates link back to Howard's reflections on societal standards. His primary concerns were welfare, health, prosperity and education for all—ideals which are impossible to refute. Howard was no stranger to problems and conflicts within his own ideal concept. In a chapter of *Garden Cities of To-morrow* called "Some difficulties considered", he offers the following advice to anyone who wants to test a town-planning model in reality:

Long-continued effort, in spite of failure and defeat, is the fore-runner of complete success. He who wishes to achieve success may turn past defeat into future victory by observing one condition. He must profit by past experiences, and aim at retaining all the strong points without the weaknesses of former efforts.<sup>17</sup>

This sounds simple enough but obviously it is not. I take it as an encouragement to evaluate the efforts of yesterday in accordance with current issues and future needs. Urban planning now stands at the threshold of an era based on circular principles, which will make it significantly harder to replace existing buildings and neighborhood structures with new ones. Caring for what is already there is the essence of circular thinking.<sup>18</sup> Howard ends *Garden Cities of To-morrow* with a discussion on the future of London.<sup>19</sup> I shall do the same here with the future of Oslo, in light of the problems and opportunities that the garden city legacy represents, with the emergence of circular thinking in mind.

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Hou, *Greening Cities, Growing Communities: Learning from Seattle's Urban Community Gardens* (Seattle: Landscape Architecture Foundation University of Washington Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, 95.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Lacy, Jessica Long and Wesley Spindler, *The Circular Economy Handbook* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, 141–152.



**Figure 1.** Sinsen Garden City in June 2022. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.  
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**Figure 2.** A new residential area at Løren in June 2022. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.  
© Even Smith Wergeland.

The book has three chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the origins of the garden city movement, its arrival and development in Norway. Chapter 2 is a detailed study of Sinsen Garden City in Oslo (Fig. 1). Many of the contemporary debates about the garden city as a form of urban living can be linked to this historical example and a new neighborhood nearby,



Løren (Fig. 2), which is often referred to in debates about densification in Oslo. This comparison relates to Kostas Mouratidis' research on livability, which has uncovered a notable lack of direct comparisons between compact cities and various degrees of sprawl.<sup>20</sup> Chapter 3 deals with the current status and future relevance of garden cities, paying particular attention to terms like livability and garden ecology.

A note of caution must be issued. I currently reside in Sinsen Garden City with my partner and our two children. My understanding of what a garden city is today and has been historically is obviously shaped by this fact. It has not been my aim, however, to write about the garden city from an activist's point of view or to "promote the garden suburb as a development model for the present and foreseeable future,"<sup>21</sup> as the authors of *Paradise Planned* openly admit in their introduction. I have tried to use my own experience as part of the critical discourse, which builds on a number of scholarly studies with different perspectives on the questions at stake. I am inspired in this endeavor by Nigel A. Raab's *The Crisis from Within*,<sup>22</sup> where he addresses the fundamental problems of methodological precision and consistency which have always haunted the humanities in general and the history disciplines in particular. All historical subfields are characterized by interpretive confusion, he argues, and that has not been mended by data-obsessive objectivism or speculative subjectivism. As historians, we are forced to maneuver as best we can at the crossroads of subjective imagination and objective invention. Either way, we ought to be as accurate as possible within the chosen framework and always remain open for criticism. This book rests on this ideal.

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20 Kostas Mouratidis, "Is Compact City Livable? The Impact of Compact Versus Sprawled Neighbourhoods on Neighbourhood Satisfaction," *Urban Studies* 55, no. 11 (2018): 2409.

21 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, *Paradise Planned*, 15.

22 Nigel A. Raab, *The Crisis from Within: Historians, Theory, and the Humanities* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2015).

