

CHAPTER 3

The Future of the Garden City

This chapter is about the garden city's status, value and justification in today's discourse on urban development, life quality and nature in the city. "As a model for decentralization to small settlements, characterized by a human environment for all to enjoy, it has played a significant role in the past and continues to do so,"¹⁴³ argues the English planning historian Dennis Hardy. But how, in what ways, and to which degree? That is the question at stake.

Since the late 1980s, "the garden city has crept back onto the planning agenda",¹⁴⁴ as Ward confirms. One might also argue that it never left, since variations on the theme were constantly rearticulated during the 20th century, from new towns via satellite towns to suburbias of all kinds. As Hardy puts it: "Garden cities, it might be concluded, have to be seen as part of rather than apart from the broader currents of twentieth-century history. No-one would seriously claim that Howard's blueprint is still valid in its entirety, but the essence of his proposals retains an enduring lure. [...] In some respects the applicability of the garden city idea is greater now than it was a century ago."¹⁴⁵ This was written in 1992, but it has only grown more relevant in light of the urgent environmental issues that society has to handle at present. Even suburbia is back on the urban menu, argued Hardy in 2012: "It might seem incongruous to portray the suburbs – so often vilified as neither urban nor rural – as a utopian ideal. Yet that is exactly what they were, and, for many, still are."¹⁴⁶

143 Dennis Hardy, "The Garden City Campaign: An Overview," in *Garden City: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Stephen V. Ward (London: Spon, 1992), 187.

144 Ward, "The Garden City Introduced," 1.

145 Hardy, "The Garden City Campaign: An Overview," 204.

146 Dennis Hardy, "Plots of Paradise: Gardens and the Utopian City," in *Earth Perfect. Nature, Utopia and the Garden*, eds. Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs, 179.

One reason for this might be some kind of collective longing for past qualities, as cities continue to grow in height, scale and density. Mark Crinson talks about “the ‘villaging’ of city centres to evoke lost or mythical forms of public life.”¹⁴⁷ Near my own neighborhood in Sinsen, a lot of history has disappeared over the past decades in the name of urban development. This enhances the fear of a corresponding scenario in the garden city. Similar concerns have been aired throughout other areas in Oslo, where single-family housing is the dominant typology.¹⁴⁸ Densification in such areas tends to drive a wedge between the politicians and planning experts on one side and the residents on the other. The antipathy towards densification runs parallel with the aversion against “villaging” among proponents of compact city development.

Densifying the Compact City

Densification is an urban development strategy that has been met with both resistance and trust for more than 100 years. Around 1900, when Howard made his mark on the planning discourse, it happened against a backdrop of general criticism against high density dwellings.¹⁴⁹ A hundred years later, the situation is completely the opposite but the battle essentially remains the same: It is a competition between two different planning strategies, densification versus decentralization, and two different urban ideals, the compact city versus the garden city/garden suburb. There are a host of positions along these axes, from the eager supporters of both to scholars who ask critical questions in almost every direction: How dense is too dense? Do single-family houses even belong in a city? Do compact neighborhoods stimulate social life and mutual respect between people from diverse backgrounds, or do they intensify differences and disagreements? It was precisely these intricate questions Harald Hals addressed in his critical remarks about the international

¹⁴⁷ Mark Crinson, ed., *Urban Memory. History and Amnesia in the Modern City* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), xi.

¹⁴⁸ See Marianne Brenna, “Ikke Til Salgs—Kampen om Småhusområdenes Herlighetsverdier” (master’s thesis, Oslo School of Architecture and Design, 2020).

¹⁴⁹ Buder, *Visionaries and Planners*, 71.

garden city movement in 1929. What he wanted, most of all, was to avoid remote satellites on the one hand and inner-city neighborhoods without enough space on the other.¹⁵⁰ We are still trying to tackle these issues.

Norwegian cities have been densifying in order to follow the growing ideal of compact living since the 1990s.¹⁵¹ Few cities have felt this more than Oslo, where densification has had broad political and administrative support.¹⁵² A report from 2008 confirmed that the level of densification had increased to more than three times the average of what was considered tolerable in the 1980s and '90s.¹⁵³ Løren, where former industrial buildings have been systematically replaced with residential buildings since 2004, is a typical example of this form of development (Fig. 23). In recent years, the densification rate has intensified in single-family housing areas across the city.¹⁵⁴ The so-called “apple-yard densification” of Oslo has been a source of much debate.¹⁵⁵ While it makes sense from a spatial point of view to densify such areas, the method seldom gains local support.

The reality is, however, that a city would not be a city without a certain concentration of humans and buildings. As Inger-Lise Saglie has argued: “When discussing densities in a city, we are really discussing the key concepts for cities. Logically, therefore, discussion of densities in the city is not a discussion about whether or not cities should be dense or not, but a discussion about the level of densities in the city within a given cultural context.”¹⁵⁶ A high concentration of people does not guarantee life quality,

150 Hals, *Fra Christiania til Stor-Oslo*, 23–29.

151 Petter Næss, Inger-Lise Saglie and Kine Halvorsen Thorén, “Ideen om den Kompakte Byen i Norsk Sammenheng,” in *Kompakt Byutvikling. Muligheter og Utfordringer*, eds. Gro Sandkjær Hanssen, Hege Hofstad and Inger-Lise Saglie (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2015), 36–47.

152 Bengt Andersen, Joar Skrede, Hanna Hagen Bjørgaas and Yngvild Margrete Mæhle, “Fortetting som Verktøy og Mål i Oslo,” *Plan* 50, no. 4 (2018): 16–23.

153 Jon Guttu and Lene Schmidt, *Fortett med Vett. Eksempler fra Fire Norske Byer* (Oslo: Miljøverndepartementet, Husbanken and NIBR, 2008), 9.

154 Waldemar Holst, “Fortetting av Byggesonen i Oslo Kommune i Perioden 2010–2020: En Kartlegging av Utbygging det Siste Tiåret” (master’s thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU), 2021), 51.

155 Brenna, “*Ikke til Salgs – Kampen om Småhusområdenes Herlighetsverdier*,” 2020.

156 Inger-Lise Saglie, “Density and Town Planning: Implementing a Densification Policy” (PhD diss., Oslo School of Architecture and Design, 1998), 57.

however. How people behave, what they want, where they are in life and what they can afford are factors of equal importance.¹⁵⁷

Densification is strongly associated with the compact city, a term coined by George Bernard Dantzig and Thomas L. Saaty in the early 1970s.¹⁵⁸ But densification is not synonymous with the compact city, argues Børrud. A really dense monofunctional area, like a cluster of high-rise apartment buildings, does not qualify as a compact urban form.¹⁵⁹ Another issue is that the three most prominent forms of sustainability in urban planning – economic, environmental and social sustainability – are not always compatible. That is one of the most challenging aspects of the compact city as a planning ideal.¹⁶⁰



Figure 23a. The new apartment blocks in Løren typically have shared green spaces in the middle. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland. © Even Smith Wergeland.

157 Saglie, 80–81.

158 George Bernard Dantzig and Thomas L. Saaty, *Compact City: A Plan for a Liveable Urban Environment* (New York: W. H. Freeman & Co., 1973).

159 Elin Børrud, “Nytt Blikk på Fortetting som Byutviklingsstrategi,” *Plan* 50, no. 4 (2018): 24–25.

160 Gro Sandkjær Hanssen, Hege Hofstad, Inger-Lise Saglie, Petter Næss and Per Gunnar Røe, eds. “Hvorfor Studere den Kompakte Byen?” in *Kompakt Byutvikling. Muligheter og Utdfordringer*, eds. Gro Sandkjær Hanssen, Hege Hofstad and Inger-Lise Saglie (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2015), 15–17.



Figure 23b. This apartment complex at Løren is part of a bigger project called Krydderhagen, which was nominated for the annual architecture award in Oslo in 2020. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland. © Even Smith Wergeland.



Figure 23c. Some of the common areas in Løren have facilities for cultivation. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland. © Even Smith Wergeland.

Despite the fact that these contradictions are quite well-known, the compact city is nevertheless promoted as a fundamentally positive form of urban development by many contemporary architects and planners. In some cases, high density is advertised almost as a guarantee for an

attractive neighborhood, as Per Gunnar Røe has shown.¹⁶¹ The problem with that, as Katie Williams has uncovered, is that sustainable solutions will not occur simply by increasing densities and mixing uses.¹⁶² Similar concerns have been raised by Elizabeth Burton, who points out that social equity only has a limited relation to compactness of form when all factors are taken into consideration. If a planning scheme fails, social equity is more often than not negatively affected by urban compactness.¹⁶³ There are disadvantages as well as benefits with high-density urban living.¹⁶⁴ Lene Schmidt has detected the same ambiguity in a Norwegian context, where she has found that densification is likely to have a positive effect on transport habits, social life, services and job opportunities, but equally likely to have a negative impact on apartments and outdoor spaces due to reductions in size.¹⁶⁵ She has also warned against a recent legislative change in the Norwegian building regulations, which makes it possible to build apartments with no direct access to sunlight.¹⁶⁶

One of the most emphatic critiques of the compact city is Neuman's article "the compact city fallacy", a systematic study of its alleged failures. These appear on many levels, he argues, mainly because the concept suffers from a number of inconsistencies. The most prominent is that cities with significant differences in their urban forms may yield the same results, and cities with similarities in their urban forms may yield different results. Neuman's conclusion is that "The little evidence that does exist regarding the sustainability of compact cities is equivocal."¹⁶⁷ A more recent study by Kristin Kjærås has identified some of the same issues, for instance that "the correlation between compact city strategies and achieved sustainability is largely taken for granted in

161 Røe, Per Gunnar, "Iscenesetelser av den Kompakte Byen – Som Visuell Representasjon, Arkitektur og Salgsobjekt," in *Kompakt Byutvikling. Muligheter og Utfordringer*, 48–57.

162 Katie Williams, "Urban Intensification Policies in England: Problems and Contradictions," *Land Use Policy* 16, no. 3 (1999): 172.

163 Elizabeth Burton, "The Compact City: Just or Just Compact?" *Urban Studies* 37, no. 11 (2000): 1987.

164 Both positive and negative outcomes are critically discussed here: Elizabeth Burton, Mike Jencks and Katie Williams, *The Compact City – A Sustainable Urban Form?* (London: Routledge, 1996).

165 Lene Schmidt, *Kompakt By, Bokvalitet og Sosial Bærekraft* (Oslo: NIBR, 2014), 37.

166 Lene Schmidt, "Snipp, Snapp, Snute – Sola er Ute," *Plan* 52, no. 3 (2020): 12–19. [This should be included in the bibliography]

167 Neuman, "The Compact City Fallacy," 11.

public and academic debates.”¹⁶⁸ The paradox prevails, in other words, largely because the authoritative climate narrative creates an “eco-spatial consensus.”¹⁶⁹ A major problem, Kjærås argues, is that the compact city approach is too much concerned with territorial logic and urban form and too little with the environmental and social impact.¹⁷⁰

But there are scholars who conclude very differently. Kostas Mouratidis has recently published a series of articles on neighborhood satisfaction and subjective well-being,¹⁷¹ and a doctoral thesis where he argues that the compact city is not necessarily detrimental to subjective well-being.¹⁷² He has detected synergies between the compact city and human well-being and connections between physical health benefits, social relationships and compact urban forms. Furthermore, his data indicates that compact city residents are generally more satisfied with their neighborhoods than those who live in sprawled neighborhoods.¹⁷³ “The higher the density, the higher the neighborhood satisfaction”,¹⁷⁴ he concludes, in direct opposition to Neuman.

Mouratidis’s work brings nuances to the debate about where people live and why, which is sometimes reduced to simple matters like space versus cost. There is a host of other parameters in between those measurable categories to consider. Where you are in life can have huge impact on your preferences. For people like myself, who lead a fairly conventional family lifestyle centered around the home (Fig. 24), some qualities are more important than others – safety and neighborhood ties, for instance. Such qualities are normally associated with suburbia but,¹⁷⁵ as Mouratidis shows, compact areas can also be livable for families as long as the totality is varied and the immediate environment is appropriate.¹⁷⁶

168 Kjærås, Kristin, “Towards a Relational Conception of the Compact City,” *Urban Studies* 58, no. 6 (2021): 1176.

169 Kjærås, 1177.

170 Kjærås, 1181.

171 Here are two examples by Kostas Mouratidis, “Is Compact City Livable?” and “Compact City, Urban Sprawl, and Subjective Well-being”, *Cities* 92 (September 2019): 261–272.

172 Kostas Mouratidis, “Compact City or Sprawl? The Role of Urban Form in Subjective Well-being” (PhD diss., Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU), 2018).

173 Mouratidis, “Is Compact City Livable?” 2408–2430.

174 Mouratidis, 2018, 2408.

175 Mouratidis, 2018, 2418–2419.

176 Mouratidis, “Compact City or Sprawl?” 141.



Figure 24. My current home in Sinsen Garden City, a ten-flat housing cooperative situated in a former butcher shop and bakery. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland © Even Smith Wergeland.

A Social Utopia?

The question of how to build a more equal society has occupied planners, philosophers, social scientists and others for centuries. Howard’s deep interest in social reform is probably his most innovative contribution to the field. The garden city was among the first urban visions that tried to map every aspect of human life, from the practical to the emotional, from the productive to the recreational. “The broad license that Ebenezer Howard was willing to issue to his ideal community made its unique growth possible”,¹⁷⁷ as Walter L. Creese put it. It is reasonable to claim that all later movements in urbanism, planning and architecture that have concerned themselves with human welfare owe a share to Howard’s groundwork. Howard’s social quest was also equipped with a realistic approach to economy that proved to be transferable to places outside the UK. All the earliest examples of garden city projects in Norway were realized through customized organizational structures, normally a form of private-public cooperation.

The problem, as previously highlighted, is that social equity cannot be achieved through a specific urban form, degree of density or organizational

177 Creese, *The Search for the Environment: The Garden City – Before and After*, 203.

framework. Urban history tells us that it is notoriously difficult to cater for the less fortunate segment of the population regardless of the overall model. That inconsolable fact is precisely what the garden city movement struggled to overcome in practice. The ironic tragedy is that the vision for all in many cases turned out to be rather exclusive. My neighborhood, with its clerical segment origins, is getting more expensive by the year. A residential unit was sold in 2021 for three times the price compared to the previous time it changed hands in 2013.¹⁷⁸ Sinsen Garden City is thus another confirmation of the grim reality of Oslo's housing market.¹⁷⁹

When Oslo's first garden cities were built, the property market had stricter regulations and the public sector took an active role in developing, building and financing housing. Holtet Garden City was realized between 1923 and 1930 through the efforts of a working-class union cooperative.¹⁸⁰ A total of 56 houses were completed at half the price per room compared with Ullevål Garden City.¹⁸¹ According to Michael Hopstock, the initial residents of Holtet Garden City primarily belonged to the working class and the lower-paid clerical segment. But only 8% of those were unskilled workers. Even in this instance, with the best of intentions and financial systems available, the garden city was beyond reach for those it would have benefited the most.¹⁸²

In addition to prevalent geographic and socio-cultural divisions,¹⁸³ two factors seem to have been particularly decisive for why Norwegian garden cities did not reach the working classes – the organizational structure of the cooperatives and the building costs. The story of Ullevål Garden City is interesting in this regard. One had to be a member of the Garden City Ltd., which appealed to people from the western part of the city, who had

178 It should be noted, however, that it was only a ground floor flat with a shared basement (and loft) in 2013. The building was sectioned afterwards, which increased the value of each section.

179 These publications explain the galloping situation: Kim Christian Astrup, "Boligprisutviklingen i Norge – Forventingenes Rolle," in *Boligmarked og Boligpolitikk*, ed. Berit Nordahl (Trondheim: Akademika Forlag, 2012), 39–55; and Hannah Gitmark, *Det Norske Hjem* (Oslo: Res Publica, 2020).

180 Bing and Johnsen, "Innledning: Nye Hjem i Mellomkrigstiden," 21.

181 Hopstock, "Holtet Hageby – En Rød Bydel?" 131.

182 Hopstock, 131–132.

183 This book chapter provides a good overview of the structural inequalities that have defined Oslo as a city historically and today: Jan Eivind Myhre, "Oslos Historie som Delt By," in *Oslo – Ulikhetenes By*, ed. Jørn Ljunggren (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2017), 29–54.

occupations such as lawyer, business manager, grocer, engineer, doctor and teacher – hardly a working-class recruitment base. Then there was a lottery to decide which lucky members would secure a flat. The whole venture then became more expensive than planned, since the building materials, maintenance and operation costs rose beyond the municipality's initial calculations. Cost overruns had to be covered by a 10% increase in the entrance fee and the monthly rent for each tenant. The ownership model later changed from a system of collective ownership in which the debt of each apartment was repaid to the company to individual ownership in which the debt became a personal responsibility for each flat owner.¹⁸⁴ This fragmentation of the collective system enabled the residents to become owners of their own flats – a leap towards the entirely market-driven prices that characterize the socio-economic profile of Oslo's garden cities today.

This is reminiscent of the early reality checks at Letchworth and Welwyn. Howard spoke eagerly about “pro-municipal operation”, but he also warned against too much control from the authorities. The garden city had to be self-supported, he argued, but reality killed the vision: It became too expensive for the designated population.¹⁸⁵ But it remains unclear whether garden cities reinforce or strengthen class divisions to a greater extent than other types of settlements. More studies of the connection between garden cities and other neighborhood typologies are needed in order to be able to draw that conclusion.

In Oslo, the problem of segregation is rooted in the city's history. The alarming thing is that the division has escalated since the dawn of the new millennium.¹⁸⁶ A prime reason for this is the unregulated property market. A high level of density can increase property values in central areas, where “everyone” wants to live, and lower the property prices in peripheral areas, where less people want to live unless they get more space inside and outside. This situation is difficult to amend. If an area

184 Einar Li, *Oslo Havebyselskap Gjennom 50 År* (Oslo: Aktietrykkeriet, 1967), 17–76.

185 See Robert Beevers, *The Garden City Utopia: A Critical Biography of Ebenezer Howard* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 168–188.

186 Jørn Ljunggren and Patrick Lie Andersen, “Vestkant og Østkant, Eller Nye Skillelinjer?” in *Oslo – Ulikhetenes By*, ed. by Jørn Ljunggren, 79.

is expensive already, so will the new homes be.¹⁸⁷ More densification in Sinsen Garden City would probably not make it any more affordable.

The greater problem at stake is that neighborhoods can have a huge impact during adolescence and later in life. The neighborhood effect, as Ingar Brattbakk and Terje Wessel define it, consists of internal factors like social habits, patterns, norms and networks, and external factors like jobs, public institutions, educational arenas and so on. The overall status of a neighborhood compared to others is also decisive. Underappreciated neighborhoods often carry a persistent stigma which, regardless of how they actually function, will brand them as “lowly” in the greater scheme of things. This brings an element of self-deprecation to the area, a feeling of being “stuck”, and it prevents people from wanting to move there. Through such structural conditions, existing divisions are amplified.¹⁸⁸

Compared to Howard’s London of the late 19th century, Oslo has a much higher living standard. But the fundamental injustice in the housing market is still there. Howard’s main mistake was to overestimate the potential of the agrarian economy – land as a source of shared wealth, cooperation and community.¹⁸⁹ His idea was that large areas of land, if organized and operated properly, would lead to an even distribution of resources and a gradual increase in value for the whole collective. Today, in the market-driven economy, land is an asset for the individual who can afford to buy it. What matters is where the land is placed, not the quality of the land itself, and how much money a person is able to invest. This is the flipside of what Howard envisioned.

But it is important to remember that Oslo’s garden cities, and garden cities elsewhere in Norway, did improve the living conditions for a significant number of people when they were new. This demonstrates that Howard’s ideas were not completely at odds with societal realities. Many garden cities were affordable to a large segment of the population and remained within economic reach, even in Oslo, until quite recently.

187 Rolf Barlinthaug, “Boligmarked og Flytting – Betydning for Segregasjon,” in *Oslo – Ulikhetenes By*, 121–144.

188 Ingar Brattbakk and Terje Wessel, “Nabolagets Effekt: Hva er Problematisk med Geografisk Ulikhet?” in *Oslo – Ulikhetenes by*, 339–358.

189 Beevers, *The Garden City Utopia*, 184.

A Garden of Earthly Delights

A consistent trademark of garden cities now and before is the cultivation culture. Sinsen Garden City is a good example of that. In the mid-1930s, a professional gardener, senior gardener Gørtz, was recruited from a nearby horticulture firm to act as a consultant for the residents of Sinsen Garden City. His advice on spraying, pruning, care and planting was hugely appreciated, according to the local newspaper.¹⁹⁰ The aim was to make the local gardens beautiful *and* useful, with special attention to growing food. Those two dimensions, esthetics and utility, run parallel through garden city history.

The garden has a long-standing tradition in modern planning and architecture and has gone through multiple guises over the past centuries, creating an enormous impact on urban life along the way. A prominent example is Frank Lloyd Wright's vision of a living city based on agrarian philosophy. "Of all the underlying forces working toward emancipation of the city dweller, most important is the gradual reawakening of the primitive instincts of the agrarian",¹⁹¹ he wrote in 1958. A few years later, the British Townscape Movement launched a project called Motopia, which was founded on a desire for garden design and road construction in equal measures. Its main architect, Geoffrey A. Jellicoe, called it a fusion of the biological and the mechanical.¹⁹² This is a fine analogy to Sinsen Garden City, where gardens are enveloped by large transport arteries on three sides.

Despite these and numerous other urban visions where the gardener has been a central figure, the profession is seldom credited in the same way as architects and planners. But the time is nigh, argues Graham Livesey, who claims that "The garden, and the act of gardening, provide potential answers to the challenges of contemporary human settlement."¹⁹³ The garden city movement, with its insistence on domestic gardens for each house, is a testament to that potential, as an effort to crossbreed active labor and active gardening. This was evident right from the start, argues

190 "Man er Begeistret over Hagekonsulentordningen i Sinsen Haveby," *Vort Vel*, March 29, 1935, 1.

191 Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City* (New York: Bramhall House, 1958).

192 Geoffrey A. Jellicoe, *Motopia* (London: Studio Books/Longacre Press Ltd., 1961), 11.

193 Graham Livesey, "Assemblage Theory, Gardens and the Legacy of the Early Garden City Movement," *Architectural Research Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2011): 277

Livesey: “The Garden City placed particular emphasis on gardening and the gardener, and on revitalizing an integrated role for farming and the farmer. Therefore, the gardener and the farmer became two vital urban figures in the Garden City Movement, figures not typically associated with urbanization.”¹⁹⁴

The class perspective immediately comes into the picture again. Not everyone gets to be urban agrarians. The urban garden has tended to be a middle- and upper-class domain.¹⁹⁵ Its origins are royal, aristocratic and bourgeois, and relatively few people have been lucky enough to have a garden of their own through urban history. That is precisely why Howard was so insistent on the importance of gardens for everyone – to break with the prevailing class hierarchy. Nowadays, the green agenda is often connected to similar ideas about parks and gardens as common goods.¹⁹⁶ At an overall planning level in Oslo, green values are mostly secured through publicly available recreational spaces like parks. Private green spaces like gardens are generally deprioritized, despite the fact that Oslo is supposed to have a multi-functional approach to nature planning according to its own administrative and political platform. Another prevalent trend is that citizens wish to protect and expand existing green spots, private and public, while private developers are keen to densify without too much commitment in advance to green elements.¹⁹⁷

Such strategic dilemmas are by no means new. When the zoning plan for Sinsen Garden City was put forward in 1929 it was met with resistance from Oslo’s Head of Planning, Harald Hals, on account of its disruptive effect on the belt of green recreation areas in the Master Plan for Oslo of 1929. To Hals, private gardens did not qualify as beneficial for the general public to the same degree as parks. From a property perspective he was right – to enter someone else’s garden is trespassing. But gardens, as

194 Graham Livesey, *Ecologies of the Early Garden City: Essays on Structure, Agency, and Greenspace* (Champaign, Illinois: Common Ground Research Networks, 2019), 87

195 Langeland, “Hage for Hvermann,” 59–61.

196 This is a key theme in this anthology: Mark Luccarelli and Per Gunnar Røe, eds. *Green Oslo: Visions, Planning and Discourse* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

197 Kine Halvorsen Thorén and Inger-Lise Saglie, “Hvordan Ivaretas Synet til Grønnstruktur og Naturmangfold i den Kompakte Byen?” in *Kompakt Byutvikling. Muligheter og utfordringer*, eds. Gro Sandkjær Hanssen, Hege Hofstad and Inger-Lise Saglie, 132–133.

uncovered recently, can have positive effects for everyone as caretakers of urban ecological diversity. “The city as a garden, comprised of gardens, remains a powerful paradigm for the ecological, sustainable city”,¹⁹⁸ argues Livesey. The idea of the garden as integral to a larger urban context was not on the radar during Hals’s reign. His wish was overruled too, since his own municipality was unwilling to secure the open landscape through acquisition. Instead, the Aker politicians responded to the urgent housing issue and approved the plan. Today, the garden city appears more like an extension than an interruption of the nearby Torshov valley.¹⁹⁹

But even if Sinsen Garden City did not ruin Oslo’s park-like character, the decision to build there nevertheless raises the question of balance between human needs and nature conservation. One problem with densification or any form of housing on natural terrain is that it decreases the total amount of green space. As history tells us, whether this is urban housing or cabin developments in Norwegian nature, building activity tends to breed more building activity. The densification in parts of Sinsen Garden City illustrates this. The new residential units house more people by diminishing the gardens. Humans have thus triumphed over nature in ways that are now being questioned by scholars who operate within fields like landscape urbanism, eco-architecture, post-humanism, deep ecology, multi-species studies and environmental humanities.

While there are obvious differences between them, these subdisciplines represent a scholarly effort to disentangle the opposition between human and non-human nature. Humans do not live in nature, we *are* nature, and nature is human, especially since our species have a tremendous impact on the planet on which all life-forms depend.²⁰⁰ As for the garden, it should no longer be regarded as a pre-defined, cultivated once-and-for-all

198 Livesey, *Ecologies of the Early Garden City*, 100.

199 Byantikvaren i Oslo, *Kulturminnegrunnlag for Hovinbyen* (Oslo: Oslo Kommune, 2016), 49.

200 The following titles build on this assumption: Paula Danby, Katherine Dashper and Rebecca Finkel, *Multiple Leisure: Human-Animal Interactions in Leisure Landscapes* (London: Routledge, 2021); Mariano Gomez-Luque and Ghazal Jafari, eds. *Posthuman*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2017); Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2017); and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 1995).

phenomena, but rather be approached as a place of multiplicity and an ongoing process.²⁰¹ Within this mode of thinking, gardens are microhabitats that “can significantly alter the environmental conditions.”²⁰² They are, to put it bombastically, indispensable in the ongoing battle to prevent planetary collapse.

It may seem futile to save the planet from one’s own backyard, but that perspective is now appearing in new literature on how to transform garden utopias into real practices. “When well and thoughtfully done, the gardener’s practice of care extends to the soil, the insects, the birds, the mice and groundhogs, and beyond that to the self, the family, the neighborhood, the community, and the planet,”²⁰³ writes Naomi Jacobs, who places the garden at the center of an alternative future. She is supported in her ambitious claims by the ecologist Douglas W. Tallamy, whose main concern is how to realize ecological utopia in actual gardens.²⁰⁴ He is critical towards suburbanization *and* densification on the grounds that both forms of development, if badly performed, create an absence of life. “The message that diversity is good for our ecosystems and therefore good for humans has been both poorly delivered and poorly received,”²⁰⁵ he argues, and points to the disappearance of insects, birds and unruly vegetation from a growing number of American landscapes. The problem, he claims, is that Western culture has privileged a landscape paradigm that favors form over function and control over natural growth, which is a fairly paradoxical way to treat nature. If we detect one or two garden intruders, either in the form of flora or fauna or both, we typically tend to eliminate everything, regardless of their actual contribution, which may be positive.²⁰⁶

201 Naomi Jacobs, “Consuming Beauty: The Urban Garden as Ambiguous Utopia,” in *Earth Perfect. Nature, Utopia and the Garden*, eds. Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs, 164.

202 Weaner, *Garden Revolution: How Our Landscapes Can Be a Source of Environmental Change*, 61.

203 Jacobs, “Consuming Beauty: The Urban Garden as Ambiguous Utopia,” 156.

204 Douglas W. Tallamy, “Achieving Ecological Utopia in the Garden,” in *Earth Perfect. Nature, Utopia and the Garden*, 286–301.

205 Tallamy, 289.

206 Tallamy, 294–298.

When Sinsen Garden City called upon the services of senior gardener Gørtz, he offered advice on how to exterminate “alien” insects and plants. Synthetic fertilizer was another favorite of his. It was regarded at the time as the future of gardening. Today it is commonly known that synthetic fertilizer has severe environmental consequences in both production terms and agricultural practice. Times change and so does the notion of what is bad or good, obsolete or future-oriented. Livesey refers to the old ways as a militaristic “battle against agents of destruction.”²⁰⁷ The initial horticulture of Sinsen Garden City is bound to be problematic from the perspective of the contemporary eco-avantgarde, which represents a wave of renewed, critical interest in the garden in the 21st century. A major point is to move away from the pragmatic maintenance approach and embrace the garden as a complex horticultural space in need of continuously evolving caretaking.

Another contemporary tendency is to abandon the idea of cultivation and embrace the idea of wilderness. The wild garden, free from human intervention, is characterized by qualities normally associated with urban wildscapes,²⁰⁸ places of vegetation that have evolved over time without any planning or design at sites like vacant lots, cemeteries, landfills, industrial wastelands and infrastructural islands. The irony, since we live in a post-wild world, especially in the cities, is that plant communities that evoke nature have to be designed by humans before they can become “authentic” and “natural” nature.²⁰⁹ It is highly unlikely, in any case, that the residents of Sinsen Garden City will allow their gardens to roam as freely as the most progressive ideals suggest. But the current generation is probably more sympathetic towards the contemporary ecological approach than the extermination strategy of the past, due to the growing awareness about the value of gardens in relation to climate issues.

What are we to make of the garden city legacy in light of such reforming perspectives on gardens and the environment? “Although not an

²⁰⁷ Livesey, *Ecologies of the Early Garden City*, 95.

²⁰⁸ Anna Jorgensen and Richard Keenan, *Urban Wildscapes* (London: Routledge, 2012).

²⁰⁹ Thomas Rainer and Claudia West, *Planting in a Post-wild World: Designing Plant Communities that Evoke Nature* (Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 2015).

environmentalist by today's standards, Howard comprehended the fundamental relationship between nature and society",²¹⁰ writes Robert F. Young, who has published extensively on sustainable planning and urban ecosystems in recent years. Howard himself wrote that "The country must invade the city."²¹¹ Had he been active today, the phrase could well have been "The garden must invade the parking lot". There is a quest these days to convert "hard", human-made surfaces to "soft" nature again. Urban gardening on balconies, rooftops and pavements is part of that action, as are gardens and allotments. If we continue to pack every surface with human-made, artificial materials, the natural ecosystem will suffer. Water management alone is a huge problem at a time when flooding is becoming more and more usual in cities. A green roof has little effect in that regard, since the water will eventually pour onto the ground. Deep soil on natural terrain is necessary to secure enough drainage – the city needs proper gardens, in other words. It is with this impact in mind that Livesey considers the garden city as an antidote to hard-surface urbanism and a potent reminder of alternate forms of urban management: "The notion, put forward by the early Garden City movement, that the city could become a garden and a community of gardeners, continues to be a model for thinking about the creation and maintenance of ecologies inhabited by humans."²¹²

Given the urgency of the climate crisis, I would suggest that Howard's agrarian perspective on city life has re-emerged with a vengeance. In the years to come, we must tackle all forms of human wastefulness. As Young puts it: "The collapse of our civilization is occurring before our eyes. While our material wealth continues to expand, the ecological systems upon which it is founded are being rapidly cut away."²¹³ With this in mind, I would argue that the most critical heritage value in Sinsen Garden City is the white winter landscape (Fig. 25), as an extension to the green discourse. Green qualities in the city tend to be treated as spring, summer

210 Robert F. Young, "Green Cities and the Urban Future," in *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, eds. Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 202.

211 Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, 156.

212 Livesey, *Ecologies of the Early Garden City*, 152.

213 Young, "Green Cities and the Urban Future," 221.



Figure 25. Winter-time action in Sinsenjordet, January 2022. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.
© Even Smith Wergeland.

and fall phenomena. Livesey refers to the “dormant winter months” when gardeners relax, celebrate their past achievements and plan the next season.²¹⁴ While there is no gardening, obviously, the green spaces in Oslo are anything but dormant during winter. They are more like an explosion of outdoor activities, made possible by snow and ice. In Sinsen Garden City, both private and public green spaces erupt into life when snowfall occurs. Snowmen, snow lanterns and home-made igloos appear in the gardens, and people congregate in the nearby park for skiing, sliding and snowball fights. However, even in a winter city like Oslo, these aspects of the garden city are rarely mentioned in ongoing debates about urban life quality.

On the gloomy side of things – and hence the sense of urgency – the winter season in Oslo is perhaps the best indicator of the climate crisis. Oslo prides itself on being a world-class skiing city but snow has become a rarer

²¹⁴ Livesey, *Ecologies of the Early Garden City*, 90.

commodity in recent years. Every winter now comes with reports about winter sports organizations that are pumping out artificial snow “to save the winter,” apparently without any sense of irony or deeper understanding of what this implies. The sinister reality is that winter is slowly fading away and that overconsumption of electricity, which is required to produce snow, only helps to aggravate the situation. “Norway has run out of snow, so they’re making it artificially instead” was the headline of a recent Euronews feature on the topic. The lack of snow in Oslo was singled out as particularly symbolic of the widespread reluctance to change course and downscale the consumer culture that contributes to accelerating climate change.²¹⁵

The consumption of existing buildings and landscapes is a major part of that issue. To improve the situation, we have to take better care of the buildings we already have. Existing buildings should be maintained, not demolished, even if they are not regarded as cultural heritage at the time when the decision is made. The timber architecture of Sinsen Garden City is well suited to a form of reuse culture founded on endurance and preservation.²¹⁶ This radical view of reuse is currently being promoted under the umbrella of circular heritage, a melting pot of existing heritage practices like adaptive reuse, sustainable preservation, and circular principles from fields like economy and design.²¹⁷ The essence, in brief terms, is to foster a management system where all forms of waste are minimized through continuous use of resources. This involves a loop instead of a linear growth model, where every existing item is valuable by default.²¹⁸ From this point of view, Sinsen Garden City and the other Norwegian garden cities are indisputable ingredients in a sustainable future as long as they are useful, repairable and appreciated.

215 Maeve Campbell, “Norway Has Run Out of Snow, So They’re Making it Artificially Instead,” Euronews.com, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/green/2020/01/24/norway-has-run-out-of-snow-so-they-re-making-it-artificially-instead>.

216 Sample, *Maintenance Architecture*.

217 See Bie Plevoets and Koenraad van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases from an Emerging Discipline* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019); Duncan Baker-Brown, *The Reuse Atlas. A Designer’s Guide Towards a Circular Economy* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2017); and Amalia Leifeste and Barry L. Stiefel, *Sustainable Heritage. Merging Environmental Conservation and Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

218 For further input, see Catherine Weetman, *A Circular Economy Handbook* (London: Kogan Page Ltd., 2020); and Peter Lacy, Jessica Long and Wesley Spindler, *The Circular Economy Handbook*.

