

Concluding Remarks

The history of the Norwegian garden cities demonstrates that the garden city concept was well suited for exportation to completely different socio-economic, cultural and geographical contexts than Howard's starting point. The broad international scope indicates that the concept was relevant, flexible and full of desirable qualities at the time of its origin. The Norwegian garden cities were a significant contribution to the development of a modern Norwegian housing tradition, rooted in both vernacular and contemporary architectural ideas. From the mountains to the lowlands, from the countryside to the urban fringe, the formula worked. The settlements were, to a large degree, successful in terms of securing shelter, a home for families who needed it at the time. For those who gained access, their standard of living undoubtedly improved, despite some deficiencies both architecturally, technically and economically during the early stages. As Hopstock writes about the legacy of Holtet Garden City: "The garden cities were probably the most effective tool to provide a high housing standard and increased life quality for common people. We can only lament that we did not continue to trust such solutions in the decades that followed."²¹⁹

But the initial success and remarkable flexibility of the concept cannot disguise the fact that the garden city movement failed in its attempt to deliver a social revolution of the proportions that Howard envisioned. The high-flying ideas of equality were impossible to implement in practice, even in an egalitarian society like Norway. This has partly to do with miscalculations in the garden city concept, and partly with the devastating truth that city life is fundamentally unfair from the outset. Sinsen Garden City is as good an example as any of that fact. When I look out

219 Translated from: "Antagelig var havebyene det mest effektive redskap til å gi vanlige folk en høy boligstandard og økt livskvalitet. Vi kan bare beklage at vi i tiårene som fulgte ikke satset mer på denne boligformen." In Hopstock, "Holtet Hageby – En Rød Bydel?", 140.

the window, I see members of the well-to-do middle-class with properties of galloping economic value. My neighbors can gaze back at me and point out that a flat of this size now costs more than an entire single-family house 30 years ago. We are the fortunate ones who have followed Oslo's property market upstream. Those who currently stand where I did upon my arrival in Oslo in 2009 – with a temporary job and a low annual income – will probably never get the same chance unless something dramatic happens to the national economy.

On a more positive note, Sinsen Garden City shows that a historical neighborhood can serve a purpose – and grow in quality – within a larger urban territory. Without the garden spots and the local park, the totality of green spaces would have been significantly lower in the wider area. The garden city has profited from the higher degree of mixed land use provided by Løren and the other surrounding neighborhoods. This means that Sinsen Garden City, which was never self-sufficient, feels more city-like than ever. Residents from different neighborhoods interact through institutions like schools and kindergartens, services like cafes and restaurants, and recreational activities like sport and park life. Such synergies were never part of Howard's garden city vision, but they have occurred nonetheless. As the densification of the area continues in the years to come, more people will gain access to a convenient part of Oslo at the crossroads of the old and the new city.

Although statistics indicate that new flats do not necessarily cool down the prices, one could perhaps hope that these areas between Oslo's inner and outer zone will eventually create a new dynamic in the property market. Some of the first-generation families who occupy the family-oriented apartment complexes will presumably move if they outgrow their flats, thus allowing others to take over. It has to be noted as well that Sinsen Garden City already has a limited assortment of smaller flats, including the ten flats located in the building where my family lives. Only one of the residents who were living here when we arrived in 2017 still remains. This can be a problem for a small housing association – the lack of continuity makes it tricky to plan long-term investments – but it provides some welcome circulation in the market.

From an architectural point of view, a garden city structure like Sinsen adds variation and traditional qualities to an area otherwise dominated by apartment blocks from the 21st century. This underestimated aspect of historical architecture may be called *esthetic sustainability*—the prevailing visual attraction of building types that could not have been built today due to legal restrictions and a standardized construction industry. I imagine that many people who pass through Sinsen Garden City appreciate the heritage, even if they are unable to place it historically and stylistically. Moreover, the legacy of timber is a potential asset from an ecological point of view. The environmental ethics of the building industry depend upon the increased use of wood in the future and more timber production.²²⁰ They also depend upon the ability to take good care of what is already here. Perhaps it is time to trust such solutions again in the decades to come, to paraphrase Hopstock?

Norwegian property developers certainly seem to think so. The garden city tag is now being used frequently in new housing projects: Sandefjord Garden City [*Sandefjord Hageby*], Lørenskog Garden City [*Lørenskog Hageby*], Skråtorp Garden City [*Skråtorp Hageby*] and Proffen Garden City [*Proffen Hageby*] to mention only a few examples. Many of these are mixtures of relatively dense apartment block structures with green facilities like allotments available for self-cultivation. What they lack, more often than not, is a holistic plan for mixed land use. Much like Harald Hals feared in the 1920s, the garden city label seems to work better for residential marketing purposes than complex planning purposes. But the garden city formula has also made a more nuanced comeback according to Eugenie L. Birch, who has found that the biggest difference between Howard's vision and recent interpretations is that Howard tried to deal with population congestion through decentralization, while today's planners are trying to fix the inner city through garden city principles.²²¹ William Fulton draws a similar conclusion in his study of the garden

220 Sven Meyer, *The Future Usage of Wood. Timber as a Sustainable Material in Construction* (Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2019).

221 Eugenie L. Birch, "Five Generations of the Garden City: Tracing Howard's Legacy in Twentieth-Century Residential Planning," in *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, eds. Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, 199–200.

city-inspired New Urbanism movement of the 1980s and 90s, which renewed the focus on neighborhood units and the town center as the heart of the civic realm.²²² It is not necessarily a question of “downtown or suburbia” anymore. Garden city principles can be applied anywhere, either in the form of new garden city-inspired neighborhoods or by preserving the existing ones.

It has probably never been particularly realistic, however, for the garden city model to carry an entire urban development on its own. A city needs more variation and diversity to appeal to different kinds of inhabitants. That is why the most interesting thing about garden city neighborhoods is how they intertwine with the other parts of the city. Their strategic purpose, then and now, has always mattered the most. When Sinsen Garden City was established, it was a matter of expanding the urban zone by utilizing a rural piece of land. A garden city approach was an amenable compromise between two colliding contexts in those days. Today it represents a much-needed green pocket within a local area characterized by two decades of densification. As long as it has a relevant role to play, argue Stern, Fishman and Tilove, it does not have to be discarded: “Planned as part of the metropolitan city, the garden suburb is the best template yet devised to achieve a habitable earthly paradise... The garden suburb may well hold the key to the future of our cities.”²²³

Another way of thinking about it, as Richard Sennett explained when I interviewed him in 2019, is that existing historical structures provide an opportunity to reflect critically about what and how we build today. The contemporary value of relevant history lessons is also central in Livesey’s *Ecologies of the Early Garden City Movement*. The past offers alternative architectural expressions and urban habits that we can learn from, not by trying to replicate them but by reinterpreting their best qualities. Cities were not necessarily better before – indeed, in Howard’s days, they could be pretty miserable – and it is important to avoid nostalgia, warns

222 William Fulton, “The Garden Suburb and the New Urbanism,” in *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, 165–169.

223 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, *Paradise Planned*, 961.

Sennett.²²⁴ But it is equally important not to overestimate the prevailing urban development ideology. There are advantages and disadvantages to Løren,²²⁵ which has been developed in accordance with compact urban development principles.

The most politically correct aspect of Sinsen Garden City in the early days was the strong promotion of public transport. It must have been perceived as far from the center in those days – it was even outside the city border – but Olaf Løken’s advertisements insisted on the convenience of the upcoming infrastructure. This was a couple of decades before the explosion in car ownership in Oslo, which probably explains why cars were never mentioned in the advertisements, but it is still striking how similar the rhetoric is to contemporary advertisements for new areas in Oslo. Rail-based transport has been a strong component in the history of the garden city in Oslo, especially in regard to the second generation. This is relevant simply because public transport is so fundamental in theories about urban sustainability. The frequency of public transport use is more important than the density of the residential structure. Suburban concentration around nodes in the public transport system may increase the public transport share, as highlighted by Røe and Saglie in a study of two Norwegian “minicities in suburbia,” Asker and Sandvika. Though not directly comparable to Sinsen Garden City due to their differing sizes and general characteristics, there are some transferable findings. One is that minicities may reduce the need to travel to the main center, which Røe and Saglie call “the substitution hypothesis.”²²⁶ This is similar to our everyday independence from downtown Oslo. The other is what they refer to as “the long-term resilience argument,”²²⁷ which regards the capacity to adapt with the times. Sinsen Garden City may not have changed a lot over the years but the surrounding area certainly has. The garden city contains

224 Richard Sennett, “Historie, Migrasjon og Musikk: Ein Samtale med Richard Sennett,” interview by Even Smith Wergeland, *Sosiologen.no*, September 21, 2019, <https://sosiologen.no/intervju/historie-migrasjon-og-musikk-ein-samtale-med-richard-sennett/>.

225 As detailed in this report: Kenneth Dahlgren, Aga Skorupka and Gro Sandkjær Hansen, *Lærdom fra Løren. En Tverrfaglig Evaluering av Utviklingen fra 2002 til 2019* (Oslo: Selvaag Bolig, Rodeo Arkitekter and OsloMet, 2019).

226 Per Gunnar Røe and Inger-Lise Saglie, “Minicities in Suburbia – A Model for Urban Sustainability?” *Form Akademisk* 4, no. 2 (2011): 38–58.

227 Røe and Saglie, 54.

two highly regarded schools, a cherished park, sports facilities and other functions that benefit the entire area. As long as the garden city continues to evolve with its surroundings and offer qualities that the city needs, its existence seems justifiable. And while it is impossible to make a general conclusion, since the answer is always influenced by the particular contextual circumstances, it nevertheless seems reasonable to claim that the garden city principle represents a string of ingredients that will be needed in the future city too.