

A systemic approach to healthy place-making – Re-imagining the Garden City

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Abstract

Introduction

Healthy place-making is a multi-dimensional concept; encompassing environmental, economic and social aspects, which are intrinsically interlinked. It brings together the built environment's various stakeholders with the physical and social infrastructures of place, in a process of strategic coordination to support longterm positive impacts on physical and mental health and well-being.

Learning from the pioneers

In 1898, Ebenezer Howard put forward a pioneering approach to healthy place-making in *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*¹. Howard's 'Garden City' movement addressed the dire living conditions faced by people drawn to towns in search of work, as technology eroded agricultural employment. At its heart, the movement promoted healthy lifestyles through holistic design²; integrating natural systems and seeking basic social and economic fairness. These values are as important today as ever they were, but they now face new issues.

Facing a new tomorrow

Current ways of life are damaging natural capital's capacity to regulate climate; to provide food, clean air and water; and to offer cultural inspiration. Artificial intelligence is rapidly reducing the demand for all but highly-skilled workers, generating a precariat trapped in poverty and low job satisfaction; though the creative use of ICT has growing potential to support an alternative cooperative economy. Social systems too face problems, with many people trapped between endemic loneliness and a pervasive sense of stranger-danger. The Garden City approach must therefore evolve to face a new tomorrow.

A multi-scalar approach to design healthy places for tomorrow

The Garden City's long-lasting success stems from the pioneer designers' embrace of complexity; weaving together the systems of natural landscape, public space³, plots and buildings⁴ in symbiotic ways across multiple scales of space and time; whilst reinvesting, for community benefit, the land-value increases that development creates.

Grange-in-the-Hedges: A case study project

We present Grange-in-the-Hedges – winner of the RIBA competition to expand the original Garden City of Letchworth - as a case study in re-imagining this multi-layered approach. An exposed water system that embraces sustainable drainage and makes ecological processes explicit as the foundations for creating ecologically aware lifestyles; a green structure enabling soil to soil agriculture; street networks fostering natural exercise and clean air through walking and cycling; development plots with fine grain mix of tenures promoting positive social cohesion; an adaptable building stock that supports intergenerational living and meets the needs of each generation; are interlaced through bottom-up information systems; challenging the stresses of underemployment, climate change and social disconnection⁵ to evolve a renewed Garden City fabric for healthy places of the future.

Beyond short-term commercialism, the project seeks long-term sustainable value-capture by community involvement through 'Share-App'. Considering data as 'currency', the idea is for residents to benefit from their own data using technological innovation to support a community-led management and governance system; key to healthy place-making.

Keywords: *Systemic multi-scalar design approach; local food, clean air and natural exercise; long-term sustainable value capture, community-led management and governance*

References

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Biography

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Soham is a co-founder and director at ERE, an urban design and architectural practice. He embraces an evidence-based people-centric approach to design. He has led multi-disciplinary design teams for masterplanning, regeneration and public realm design projects within a diverse cultural contexts such as the UK, Cuba, Middle-East, and India.