

Architecture of Prosperity Series: London and the Evolution of Suburbia

A Tale of Two Suburbs

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I'm going to talk about what we can learn about the *future* of London suburbs from what has *already* been built. I've chosen to focus on the London Borough of Barnet because it typifies much of suburban London: it's made up of 33½ square miles of parks, gardens, houses, flats, offices and high streets.

I'll be looking in particular at two areas which, to my mind, illustrate the extremes of British suburban development over the past century. First is Hampstead Garden Suburb, built between 1909 - 1936, a haven of peace and tranquillity, neat hedges and middle class affluence. The second, 3½ miles north-west, is The Grahame Park Estate completed in 1971, and notorious as a drug-riddled, high crime, low income estate. Today it's undergoing comprehensive demolition and redevelopment.

Our story starts not in Barnet, or even North London, but in the East End - in Whitechapel. It was here, in the 1870s, that the ideas that led to the creation of Hampstead Garden Suburb were being dreamed of. Henrietta Barnett, the wife of a Whitechapel vicar, was appalled by the living conditions of the urban poor she saw all around her. Bad sanitation, overcrowding and disease were rife, and there was no escape from the black soot of the city, no green space. And so with the zeal of any right-minded Victorian 'social reformer', she set about creating a brave new world. She founded Toynbee Hall - a place where university students could live while they undertook social work. She was instrumental in local initiatives such as the new Whitechapel Art Gallery, as well as the Children's Holiday Fund and Workers' Educational Association. But she wanted *more* - to create a better place for people to live, to literally lift people out of the slums. Barnet's dedication and determination led her to conceive of Hampstead Garden Suburb; and her own singular character and vision informed its design.

Henrietta's project was part of a wider 'Garden City' movement, pioneered by Ebenezer Howard in his seminal book of 1898, *Tomorrow a Path to Real Reform* (reprinted 4 years later as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*). The garden city - with clear separation between areas for work and home - was designed as an antidote to the grim factory towns that had developed during the period. Taking its inspiration from the work of industrialists such as Cadbury at Bourneville and Lever Brothers at Port Sunlight to build healthy communities for their employees, Howard's book stressed the importance of gardens and green spaces which, it claimed, would eliminate

many of the ills of industrial Britain. The first garden city was built in Letchworth in 1903. Its architect, Raymond Unwin, was then invited by Henrietta Barnett to build her new utopia in leafy Hampstead.

Today this 800 acre site features some of the best suburban architecture in the country. The houses are beautiful and desirable - Peter Mandelson, Jonathan Ross and Sacha Baron-Cohen have all lived here. Lord Winston, resident and pioneer of IVF, describes it as: *"A unique part of London that provides a peaceful and natural haven in our bustling and exciting city"*. The journalist Martin Bell says that: *"Moving to the suburb is one of the best decisions I ever took"*. But let's hop into our luxury 4x4, an essential part of life in this wealthy suburb, and take a short drive, just 10 minutes up the A1 to the other side of Barnet, to visit The Grahame Park Estate. It is also a descendent of Ebenezer Howard's ideas on the Garden City with a dash of Le Corbusier thrown in for good measure: modernist concrete, high density blocks of flats, which were originally connected by walkways in the sky and centred on a park.

Grahame Park shares a surprising amount in common with Hampstead Garden Suburb. Parks, gardens and small green spaces, two churches, separation of pedestrian and car traffic and limited public transport - I'll come back to *that* later. But there are key differences, too - one suburb is designed to look like an old English village, the other was modelled on rational and modernist architecture. One has tennis courts and well-tended allotments to fill up your leisure time; the other has access to cut-price booze - counter-service only. At this point, some of us might want to get back into the 4x4 with its heated seats, and head back home to Hampstead. Because if we are to judge the success of these suburban morphologies by the prosperity of their residents, or the beauty and veneration of their built environment, then Hampstead Garden Suburb provides a clear and simple answer: it is the blueprint for a bright suburban future.

But what happens when we start to ask questions about what a suburb should be? Or what the purpose of a city really is? Or the inter-relationship of the two? Let's go back to Ebenezer Howard, that architect and visionary of the Garden City. He defined the perfect garden city as limited in size to 32,000 people - but he never saw any contradiction in how he came to his conclusion. Because Howard developed his ideas not in some bucolic corner of rural England but in London, which at that time - in the late 1800's - had a population of 4 million. It was the scale of London that I would argue made it possible for Ebenezer Howard to develop contacts with other likeminded social reformers, to be inspired by the radical ideas of William Morris or John Ruskin.

The same contradiction lies at the centre of the original urban utopia, imagined by Thomas More. His ideal city - ordered, spacious and rational - was born out of medieval London, with its dense, intimately connected streets, chaotic layout and bustling connections to other urban centres. Early 16<sup>th</sup> century English universities knew what was happening in Paris, Padua and Siena - More's world was a connected one, and London was a global centre for travel and exchange, for ideas and goods to be traded.

It is the proximity and sheer variety of ideas that make cities the vibrant places they are - that was true then and it's true now. And it is this socio-economic engine, fired by key intellectual and interpersonal relationships, that forms the bedrock of urban life because it is from all this that commerce flourishes, where new ideas are generated and friendships created. This is the city: a socio-economic engine fuelled by human endeavour. Cities need this human network - and they need it to be built, I would argue, in a complex, disorganised and brilliantly chaotic urban fabric - in order to thrive. So while More's Utopia, with its 6 hour working day and uniform dress code for everyone, might have been ordered and manageable, it was also likely to be exactly as Bertrand Russell described it: 'intolerably dull'.

So much for the city - but what, then, is a suburb? Often the answer has been: a place away from the city with the benefits of the country and green space, separate from the jobs and the nasty business of commerce. This separation of people from the city, from the social and economic life that makes cities work, is the defining character of both our examples: Hampstead Garden Suburb and Grahame Park. Detachment and separation of work, play and living space, are set in stone in the principles of the Garden City movement and le Corbusier's modernist 'take' on the city. The suburbs we have created as a result could be called 'Anti-Cities': they do not foster the key interpersonal contacts that make great cities.

Grahame Park failed as a suburb, not because it was ugly - there are plenty of successful and ugly developments and estates. It failed because it became detached from the city, caught in a vicious circle of isolation. Its social housing was populated by only the least affluent. Its internal structure made it threatening and a haven for crime. It was designed without commercial opportunities for residents, and the population, with poor resources and limited access to public transport, was unable to take advantage of the surrounding city. Its residents became stuck.

But our other example, Hampstead Garden Suburb, much-beloved by its residents, is also stuck. It has two Grade I listed buildings, and seven hundred and forty Grade II Listed buildings. The entire 800 acres is subject to one of the strictest and most comprehensive conservation orders in London. You cannot paint your window frames, or put up a climbing frame or shed in your garden without permission. An overgrown hedge is subject to 'mandatory trimming', enforced by Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust, or as I like to call them 'the hedge police'. And Hampstead Garden Suburb is - like its near neighbour Grahame park - *also* isolated and cut off from the rest of the city. Public transport is limited to a '4 times an hour' minibus.

Bertrand Russell's verdict on utopias - that they were intolerably dull - seems to ring out from the Central Square. The square is made up of two churches, one girls' grammar school and a building that once housed the Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute. The vast majority of residents have absolutely no reason to go there. (The Institute, by the way, was one of the core principles of Henrietta Barnet's vision for the suburb - a place for adult learning and self-improvement. This has now moved to nearby East Finchley, to be near a tube station, so that people actually access it!)

If the business of educating your mind took centre stage in Henrietta Barnett's garden suburb, then the messy business of spending money was relegated to the fringes. Shops (MAP) were put here on the A1 - a busy, characterless dual carriageway which wouldn't be most people's first choice for where to have a morning cappuccino. From 'not knowing your neighbours', to not being able to buy a newspaper or pint of milk without getting into that 4x4 - places like Hampstead Garden Suburb isolate people from each other and the wider city. This upper middle class ghetto separates the people who live there from the benefits of city living - devoid of a pub, shop or cafe at its centre, it is almost impossible to engage in any socio-commercial activity within its bounds and the suburb lives parasitically off the successful, and much more mixed suburbs nearby in Golders Green, Temple Fortune and Highgate. Hampstead Garden Suburb's residents go there to buy their papers and have their coffee.

Without these surrounding places, our leafy suburb would be a failure - it is its location that makes it work. Let's do a thought experiment and lift Hampstead Garden Suburb from London and surround it not with a series of thriving urban villages, but with more of the same: an endless sea of Tudorbethan monotony, row-upon-row of residential space with neatly manicured gardens. No cinema, no restaurant, no corner shop, and one suspect no celebrities. But a lot of out-of-town shopping centres and even more cars. We can see it for real when we look at Britain's postwar new towns and the suburban developments being built as we speak on the periphery of London. Were it not for its unrivalled context, I doubt very much if Hampstead Garden Suburb would be the middle class haven and beacon of prosperity it is today. Certainly, it is not a model that we would want to see mirrored across the country.

And what of the lofty ideals of Henrietta Barnett, who designed her suburb to rescue the urban poor? Could anyone from Whitechapel afford to live here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Would they even want to? Perhaps her success in urban planning is best summed up by Edward Lutyens, architect of the Central Square, who described Henrietta as "A nice woman, but proud of being a philistine - has no idea much beyond a window box full of geraniums, over which you can see a goose on a green." So much for our well-meaning Victorian.

Let's hop, one last time, into the imaginary 4x4 and visit somewhere *new* - it's called Mill Hill and it's a 'suburban village' in north west London. Only it's not new at all - it's been here for centuries, changing and evolving, meeting the needs of its population since at least 1374, when it was first recorded. Today it is home to a minor public school, Saracens Rugby Club, the National Medical Research centre, the UCL physics department observatory and a vibrant high street built around Mill Hill Thameslink station. It is a successful, thriving and diverse community. Yes, there are cars, but there are regular trains and buses too. People interact at the chemist and the post office. The shops are often serviced by people who live locally; there's a fish and chip shop on the high street, you can buy kebabs or a piping hot cappuccino, and those who have urgent need of a cigar or bottle of Chateaufort du Pape can pop into the independent wine merchant.

Mill Hill has never been designed. It did not try to answer the question: what should a suburb be? It allowed people to define their own answers, through supply and demand, and in doing so built an integrated social and economic hub, symbiotically linked to the rest of the city. Too often our utopian ideas have failed because they cannot change - they create places where the planners and designers think people should live. It is an idea rooted in the very origins of the garden city movement and those workers cottages at Portsunlight and Bourneville, which defined peoples' lives with factory work by day, and a bucolic cottage near a green field to return to at night. That is now a completely outdated model, but its legacy survives - in Grahame Park, in Hampstead Garden Suburb and in the development of countless other suburbs throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

If we are to build successful suburbs in the future, suburbs that generate their own ideas, create their own economy and are *part* of the city, we must move away from the utopian answers that give us hermetically sealed 'residential bubbles', separated from the city and unable to change. Let's return to the village - not the chocolate box village which only *looks* the part. But a real village - a hub of socio-economic activity. A place that asks the question of its inhabitants: 'how do you want to live?' An adaptable, ever-changing 'suburban village': interconnected and interdependent, a place that enriches the city around it.