

# Hampstead Garden Suburb

## Brave New World?

**In the summer of 2008 a group of landscape architecture and spatial planning students from Wageningen visited London and Southern England on a study trip. The programme included Hampstead Garden Suburb, one of the best-known examples of 'garden city' planning in London. Dating from the early years of the last century its design concept was to influence Dutch garden cities of the 1950's and 60's. Professional Blue Badge Guide, David Thompson, gave a tour and provides TOPOS with the context and 'Genius Loci', the sense of the place.**

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When we think of the picturesque English village we see a huddle of houses and cottages of varying sizes and heights, built in local vernacular materials, clustered in a 'higgledy-piggledy' manner around a visual focus of the parish church with its tower or spire. Nearby, there may be a village green which was common land for the inhabitants to use for sports or pastimes and perhaps a manor house, home of the local squire or lord. We might describe this image as 'chocolate-box'.

The appearance of such places may delight us today, but their development, in visual terms at least, was anything but conscious. Beyond location, perhaps adjacent to water or taking advantage of a valley for shelter or hill-top for security, such places grew by a gradual process within the topography of the landscape to accommodate the needs and lives of people. Men simply built shelters to house their families on what little land they could acquire, from materials found close-to-hand. Building methods, though generally crude, developed through numerous years of experimentation and structures were changed or enlarged, dependent upon such basics as success of a harvest or number of children born and surviving. If there was an obstacle such as a large tree people just walked round it. When the tree either died or was cut down, the established path was maintained rather than straightened, as homes or enclosures had probably long-since been established along its curves. Only the church and manor house, frequently incorporating expensive materials imported into the area and built respectively to impress for the glory of God and a man's wealth and social position, might be considered architecture.

Periodically, people of wealth and influence have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to consciously emulate such habitations. In the eighteenth century, English landscape

designers swept villages away and re-sited consciously picturesque new-builds to improve the view from rich men's windows. The aim was to create the impression of an elysian rural idyll, although more enlightened landowners might have more practically used the opportunity to improve living conditions for their estate workers.

Powerful and philanthropic industrialists of the high Victorian-age built model villages in which to house their workers. Here they lived in well-built homes with sanitation and enjoyed life-enhancing centres such as schools, community halls offering social events and evening-classes, churches and sports fields, in the shadow of the great factories and mills that provided their employment. The Prince of Wales is today conducting his own social, environmental and architectural experiments, praised and criticised in equal measure, in the model village of Poundbury near Dorchester, under the direction of American architect and urban planner Leon Krier. In the masterplan, buildings of varying styles and material composition are juxtaposed at angles, positioned along curving streets or grouped in squares and courts, with strictly regulated ground surfaces and plantings. Such concepts were and still are, attempts to create environments pleasing to the eye and pleasant to live in, whilst holding and sustaining human communities and social needs based upon traditional patterns that evolved over centuries. Some are undoubtedly more successful than others, but all should be viewed in the context of the time and beliefs in which they were created.

London also has model villages or communities woven into its urban fabric. One of these is Hampstead Garden Suburb, situated a few miles due north of the city's centre.

At the turn of the century the metropolis was expanding rapidly, assisted by the



development of the Underground Railway (known as the Tube today). When the lines emerged from tunnels under Central London, they were frequently continued above ground into the surrounding suburbs and open land beyond. Londoners now had the facility to leave densely built-up areas and, within a relatively short journey, be close to open countryside to take recreation and fresh-air. The railway also encouraged speculative developers to buy open land for house building and the age of the commuter was born. A downside was that all too often, in the haste of profit-making, developments were poorly built in a haphazard and uncoordinated manner.



Just south of where Hampstead Garden Suburb stands today, was Hampstead Heath, a beautiful undulating area of 288 hectares of woodland and open heath and grassland, immortalised by artists such as John Constable, and preserved for all time for the enjoyment of Londoners. Although only a few kilometres from the centre, in the early years of the twentieth century, wide tracts of open countryside reached to the northern boundaries of the Heath.



In 1906 a remarkable woman called Henrietta Barnett owned a cottage in the area and sensing that the opening of an extension of the railway from Hampstead to a distance several kilometres further north, posed an immediate threat to the surrounding landscape, she began a personal crusade. As she was to say, *'it required no imagination to see rows of ugly villas in the foreground of that far-reaching and far-famed view'*. With formidable campaigning zeal Henrietta raised sufficient support and funds to purchase an additional 32.5 hectares as an extension to the Heath. Although at an age when many people might be considering retirement, Henrietta's story did not end there. Of genteel birth and described as, *'a girl who had been reared in a luxurious home, accustomed to lavish living and entertain-*



ing, who revelled in hunting and gardening and outdoor life', Henrietta married a clergyman and together they lived for many years in London's East End administering to the social needs of the poor. The legacy of their ministry remains to this day.

Henrietta harboured a dream of building a community 'where all classes of society and standards of income should be accommodated'.

She was a great admirer of Ebenezer Howard, social reformer and pioneer of Town Planning, whose vision of responsibly planned high-standard environments offering social and economic integration, provided an alternative to the soulless ribbon development prevalent at the time and formed the planning-basis for the Garden Cities of Letchworth and Welwyn to the north of the capital. Such principles appealed to Henrietta and she determined that they should be applied to anything she might build herself. With unflagging energy and persuasiveness she enlisted a number of influential people, bringing both gravitas and finance, to form the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust, with the sole purpose of realising her dream. Money was provided to purchase a further 98.5 hectares.

When Letchworth was built to the designs of Barry Parker & Raymond Unwin, the Trust took notice of the strength of its conceptual integrity and appointed Unwin to prepare plans for the Suburb. Although Hampstead's concept was the creation of a 'village'

community, it has always been known as the Suburb.

Edwin Lutyens who was making a name for himself as an architect of country houses was later appointed consulting architect. A private Act of Parliament was needed to protect Unwin's designs, incorporating groupings of houses around miniature village greens or cul-de-sacs, from restrictive local bye-laws which demanded housing to be built along through-roads. This Act was the forerunner of the first Town Planning Act in Britain and also allowed the Trust to build an average density of 20 houses per hectare within the overall plan. Houses were more densely packed in some areas, in particular artisan homes, which were usually grouped or terraced, in contrast to more spaciouly positioned detached homes intended for wealthy professionals.

On the 2 May 1907, Henrietta Barnett herself, ceremoniously turned the first sod and construction commenced. Roads were to be tree-lined and there were to be no dividing walls between plots, all necessary division and boundary-marking being of low hedging. On the highest point of the gentle undulating site a town square was intended to act as a social, religious and visual central focus. Housing provision was to be made for varying threads of social fabric, including the elderly and even single professional women, for whom a cloistered monastic-style court was scheduled.

Unwin provided the masterplan and a

number of up-and-coming architects were enlisted to design houses and buildings for varying domestic and community needs. This was a bold move, as it was ultimately to create within the Suburb contrasting senses of intimacy, spaciousness, and grandeur. Architectural design incorporated reference from established historic housing style associated with differing social levels, emphasising harmonious visual variety and at least attempting to convey an impression that the Suburb had grown piece-meal through a passage of time. Artisan homes resemble stylised rural vernacular cottages with low-reaching roofs, plastered and painted white or pebble-dashed, whilst in contrast those of the wealthy in the neighbouring environs of the Square are built of red and blue brick, with sash-windows and detailing resembling the domestic architecture of Christopher Wren. Throughout the full domestic range, excellence in quality of materials and construction was employed.

Planting also reflected the social-economic status of the occupants. Hedging surrounding the cheaper homes was of privet and fruit trees were planted in the gardens, while more expensive properties were divided by yew. Individual plots were laid out in the understanding that poorer people would want to grow vegetables and fruit, in contrast to the more affluent who would use theirs for recreation and the growing of flowers. For the parade-ground scale Central Square featuring vast lawns, Edwin Lutyens designed twin churches, both resembling high-pitched brick built, clay tile roofed tithe-barns. The roof of The Free Church, punctured and capped with an Italianate green copper dome, and that of neighbouring St Jude's by a soaring spire, were to act as visual markers in distant views and create a sense of place. Lutyens was also responsible for the 'Wrenesque' style Institute, resembling a miniature Hampton Court Palace, along the northern side of the

Square, containing educational facilities and a theatre.

Acting as a barrier between the Suburb and a landscape that, even today, reflects its rural past as it stretches up to Hampstead Heath, a buttressed brick wall was built. Known locally as The Great Wall, it is punctuated at regular intervals by what appear to be watch-towers, but are in reality gazebos in the raised gardens of some of the wealthier homes hidden behind. In its centre, a flight of wide steps leads to a receding vista of large detached houses, culminating with the church of St Jude's. Here the lawns are neatly trimmed, flower borders are in check and hedges are razor clipped. The landscaping and spacing between the classically-detailed houses gives an impression of leisured grandeur. This was the preserve of the wealthy and Edwin Lutyens, who twenty years later was engaged on the architectural and landscaping project of the century in the creation of the Imperial Capital of New Delhi, designed to impress. It is a place where it seems the only sound might be the whack of tennis balls against rackets.

In contrast, lesser homes a short distance away nestle in intimate clusters, with narrow passages affording glimpses of cottage style gardens beyond. Laughing children in smocks might run by rolling hoops at any moment. Rich man, poor man, through architecture and

landscaping, the Suburb fulfils a picture-book notion of *'an Englishman's home is his castle'*. Skilful utilisation of the contours of the land of both architecture and planting as well as juxtaposition of styles, heights and social range, give the Suburb visual variety and rhythm. In parts there is beauty, whereas the design of other areas we might be tempted to describe as 'twee'. Visually the Suburb has survived much as Henrietta Barnett envisaged.

The entire scheme is now a conservation area and changes to properties can be made only under considerable limitations and consultation. The landscaping has reached lush maturity and appears at ease with itself. Only the formal expanses of Central Square cry for attention, victim to cuts in local authority maintenance budgets. The lawns are still mowed, but geometric rose beds are in need of replanting and lines of once pleached lime trees have long since been left to grow unrestricted. Roads not designed to accommodate numerous motor vehicles are now lined with them, their owners having few alternative parking spaces, the earliest houses being built with neither garages or drives in a then relatively car-less world. Some might say that this is a preferable alternative to what is currently happening all over London, with front gardens not protected by conservation controls, being ripped out and paved to provide

parking spaces, increasing both urban blight and flood-risk as water can't then drain away naturally.

Perhaps the least successful element of the Suburb is a physical lack of social centring which was apparent even when it was first completed. The churches may have provided spiritual focus, the Institute educational focus and the Clubhouse a degree of social focus, but as public houses and shops were not incorporated in the plan, people have in general always tended to move from place-to-place with individual purpose and not stopped to gather. Central Square provides little reason to linger.

Ironically, Henrietta Barnett's social vision of an 'idyllic village' for social integration, so thoughtfully achieved, has failed under the financial pressures of 20th century city living. Hampstead Garden Suburb is today a very desirable address and even the former artisan cottages as owner-occupied dwellings, are now far beyond the reach of service-sector families. Any notion of mixed social classes living in close proximity and harmony has long since evaporated. Nonetheless, the concept of the Suburb was a brave initiative. It can still be said that *'many designers use their heads but those of Hampstead Garden Suburb used their hearts'*.

