Fit for Heroes?
The Impact of the Great War on Town and Country Planning

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I am greatly honoured to deliver the 2014 Nigel Mayhew Annual Lecture, particularly before an audience including members of Nigel’s family. Nigel was a highly regarded lawyer serving in the government legal service. His work covered public law, planning and transport. He was active in the City of Westminster Law Society - particularly in organising its lecture programme. I did not know Nigel personally. However, I trust that given his obvious interest in looking at planning law in its wider context that he would have appreciated my choice of topic for tonight.

It is frequently claimed that the discipline of town and country planning emerged in the wake of the War. The question, of course, is which war? The answer most generally given is the Second World War. After all, it produced the Barlow, Scott and Uthwatt commissions, the New Towns Act 1946 and the Town and Country Planning Act 1947. But two and a half millennia previously the Persian Wars had devastated Miletus, providing the impetus for Hippodamus, styled the inventor of town planning by no lesser authority than Aristotle, first to deploy his eponymous grid plan. Planning and war, it would seem, have a long and intimate relationship.²

It is true that the Second World War undoubtedly played an important role in the development of contemporary town and country planning. But the Royal Institute of Town Planning has been celebrating its centenary this year. This rather suggests that town planning was not invented by the 1947 Act or even as a reaction to 1930’s ribbon development

¹ I am very grateful to Charles Streeten, pupil barrister at Francis Taylor Building, Temple, for his considerable contribution to this lecture.
² Aristotle *Politics* 1267(b) (ὅς καὶ τὴν πόλεων διαίρεσιν ἔφε)
Town planning, as we know it today, did not materialise spontaneously on either VE or VJ days. The post-war planning acts were grounded in a pre-existing planning philosophy. Developed organically from a nineteenth century culture of philanthropy, town planning evolved in tandem with a budding public health agenda. And within that period of evolution, the Great War - as it used commonly to be known - was pivotal: both in terms of the establishment of the discipline itself, but also in terms of the identify of its leadership: As Slavitt noted “Germany was the model for city planning in the pre-World War I era; however, when all things German became ‘sinister,’ new advances in city planning were demanded from Allied countries.”

Before examining the significance of WWI, we should pause to consider exactly what defines our modern conception of the discipline of town and country planning. What separates modern Planning from its predecessors; from the laying out of the Georgian quarters of Bath or Wren’s plans for London after the Fire of London and from related disciplines like architecture?

There are three basic concepts which mark out the step change. First, contemporary planning practice is decidedly more scientific, balancing competing social, economic and aesthetic concerns. Secondly, planning has an independent professional and institutional identity. Thirdly, and most importantly, modern town and country planning is not just state-sponsored but state-driven; it is an inherently governmental operation. Whilst the nascent planning system of the early twentieth century had begun to assume all three of these key characteristics, the Great War had a catalytic effect upon its progress, and in particular provided the impetus for much more significant state intervention in the field.

*Planning before the Great War*

The philanthropic origins of town planning in Britain are most clearly visible in the model villages built by prominent industrialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The most famous examples are William Lever’s Port Sunlight, George Cadbury’s Bournville, and Joseph Rontree’s New Earswick. Designed for more than merely housing employees, these small communities were, in effect, private social experiments.

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4 Ravetz, A 2001 *Council Housing and Culture: The History of A Social Experiment* (London) 33
chairman of the Society for Promoting Industrial Villages.\textsuperscript{5} Simply put, the Society championed high quality, low-density housing with private gardens and recreational, educational and commercial facilities, all encircled by a “green belt” of farms and allotments.

Model villages provided a template for what became known as the ‘Garden City’. In 1904 Raymond Unwin, who had been the architect at New Earswick, helped plan and build the first Garden City at Letchworth as well as the later Hampstead Garden Suburb. The concept itself, however, was the brainchild of Unwin’s partner at Letchworth, Ebenezer Howard, who coined the term in his 1898 book \textit{Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform}.\textsuperscript{6} He presented the ‘Garden City’ as a utopian vision, synthesising the economic benefits of city living with the rural amenity of the countryside, which he illustrated with his famous ‘Three Magnates’ diagram.\textsuperscript{7} This simple but revolutionary idea laid the cornerstone for the development of Planning as we know it today.

The Garden City ideal had a strong influence upon John Burns, the president of the Local Government Board and originator of the Housing and Town Planning Act 1909, not least because he was advised by Thomas Adams, the first Secretary of the Garden City Movement.\textsuperscript{8} The movement’s principles of open space and low-density housing were consequently amongst the principal benefits the planning section of the legislation sought to achieve. But whilst the Act granted Local Authorities powers to control development, its provisions were discretionary and, in practice, largely unsuccessful. Nevertheless, it established the potential for government intervention in the field and brought planning within the conceptual remit of public control.

\textit{An International Identity}

The emergence of the discipline of town planning in the early twentieth century was not just a British phenomenon. Germany was at the vanguard of planning progress. German cities had not suffered the same haphazard effects of industrialisation as their British counterparts and examples like Joseph Stubben’s re-planning of Cologne proved influential in guiding international thought.\textsuperscript{9} In America two competing schools of thought grew up: the City Beautiful

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} Ibid 34
\item \textsuperscript{6} Ravetz (2001) 50
\item \textsuperscript{7} Mervyn, M. 2010 \textit{English Garden Cities: An Introduction} (Swindon) p.4; Ravetz (2001) p.52
\item \textsuperscript{8} Stephenson, G 1995 \textit{Compassionate Town Planning} (Bristol) 20
\item \textsuperscript{9} Slavitt, L 1994 \textit{Reconstruction and World War I: Internationalism and the Idea of the Expert} (Columbia) p.3; Phillips, W 2008 \textit{The ‘German example’ and the professionalization of American and British City Planning at The Turn of the Century}, Planning Perspectives, 11:2, 170
\end{itemize}
and City Efficient movements. Whilst the City Beautiful rested primarily upon more traditional architectural notions of city planning, the City Efficient represented a more sociological endeavour, influenced by British planner Patrick Geddes’ survey driven approach, which chimed more closely with other early twentieth century planning movements internationally.

The increasing international prominence of planning helped galvanise its institutional identity. In 1910 the Royal Institute of British Architects held the Town Planning Conference, attracting 1,250 participants from Europe, South America and the USA. Along side Howard and Unwin, the roster of attendees included Geddes and Adams, as well as Stubben from Germany and Charles Mulford Robinson, a driving force behind the City Efficient movement in the USA.¹⁰ This Congress may then mark the moment at which planning affirmed its own distinct and internationally recognisable identity. In 1910 Adams was appointed the first Town Planning Inspector at the Local Government Board. Over the next few years he met regularly with other practitioners and on 21 November 1913 convened the first meeting of the Town Planning Institute, which launched publicly in January the next year.

**Wartime Developments**

It might seem from the above that Planning had fully matured before the outbreak of the Great War. However, in Britain at least, the emergent planning establishment’s influence had in many ways remained largely academic. There had been little practical application of the pioneering ideas discussed above. The 1909 Act required Local Authorities to pay full market value (plus ten per cent compensation) for land purchased compulsorily and as a result they were unsurprisingly reticent to engage with the Acts discretionary provisions. Just thirteen schemes were put forward nationally of which two received approval.¹¹ Economics trumped social progress and planning was left in the private sphere, unimplemented save for projects like Letchworth and Hampstead Garden Suburb, which in truth resembled private experiments rather than early examples of a new age of planned development.

War changed everything. Wartime industry required significant provision of housing for those who worked in munitions factories and the government was forced to build on an unprecedented scale to meet this demand. To facilitate its building programme the wartime

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¹¹ Ravetz (2001) 70
government passed two Housing Acts in 1914 and 1915. Under the first the state agreed to subsidise ten per cent of the cost of new development, empowering the Local Government Board to spend £4 million on housing.\textsuperscript{12} This was a crucial turning point; war had at last provided the necessary stimulus for economic state intervention in the housing sector. In fact, by the end of the war the Treasury had funded thirty-eight new estates, four built by local authorities and the remainder by private enterprise.\textsuperscript{13}

These new estates were laid out on ‘Garden City lines’. Joseph Rowntree’s son Seebohm was the Director of Welfare in the Ministry of Munitions and Unwin served in the same department. Consequently, the opportunity for social reform provided by the necessity of building was not overlooked. As Christopher Addison, then Under Secretary for labour affairs related, “Lloyd George and I agreed… use ought to be made of the exceptional situation to secure a better and more human standard of working conditions”\textsuperscript{14}. Garden City ideology found lasting expression in the communities built to house wartime labourers.

The first and most notable of the wartime housing schemes was at Well Hall, to accommodate those working at the Royal Arsenal, Woolwich. Garden City principles were at the fore of the development, with houses built twelve to an acre. However, the cost of construction was astronomic and led to the suggestion that building on Garden City lines should be abandoned.\textsuperscript{15} The end result was that the subsequent housing projects conformed to a much simpler and less ambitious aesthetic, exemplified in the housing for munitions workers at Gretna. The Great War had, however, provided the necessary impetus for state involvement in the building, a hugely significant turning point in the history of planning policy.

\textit{Homes Fit for Heroes}

Just as important for planning’s development were the social and economic conditions that the War left behind in 1918. War had created an intractable housing dilemma; the cost of building had risen dramatically and at the same time there was an urgent shortage of housing. Men had fought or died for the nation and in post-war Britain fear of civil unrest and the perceived threat

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\textsuperscript{12} Swenarton, M 1981 \textit{Homes Fit for Heroes: the politics and architecture of early state housing in Britain} (London) 50
\textsuperscript{13} Ravetz (2001) 74
\textsuperscript{14} Swenarton (1981) 50
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid 51
\end{flushleft}
of industrial revolution made the provision of quality housing for the working classes a priority.\textsuperscript{16} It was against this background that Lloyd George made his famous statement on 23 November 1918 that “slums are not fit homes for the men who have won this war”, in effect announcing his commitment to what are commonly referred to as ‘Homes Fit for Heroes’.

One year earlier Sir John Tudor Walters, a liberal MP and director of the Hampstead Garden Suburb had been chosen to chair a committee to consider the design of working class housing. Amongst the other members of the committee was Raymond Unwin. The Committee published its report shortly before the Armistice, extolling what were in effect pure Unwinian values. The layout proposed for new development recalled Howard’s original ideology but favoured urban expansion over new settlement. Garden suburbs were preferable to garden cities.\textsuperscript{17}

The Report’s recommendations were given statutory force in the Housing, Town Planning Etc. Act 1919 (the Addison Act as it is commonly known). This made compulsory the preparation of town planning schemes for towns with a population of more than 20,000 and gave extremely generous local government subsidies for housing, limiting potential losses to the product of a one (old)-penny rate. The Act was in practice too successful and consequently too expensive. Addison was dismissed as Minister for Health and the programme abolished in 1921, with subsequent Housing Acts in 1923 and 1924 reproducing its provisions, albeit in a much diluted form. Nevertheless, the need for social reconstruction in the wake of the Great War had prompted significant government activism in the planning realm and laid the foundations for the modern system of planning regulation.

\textit{Reconstruction on the European Continent}

In many ways Continental planning developments mirrored those in the UK. Two months before the Addison Act, a French law adopted in March 1919 required towns with a population over 10,000 to produce a plan for their “improvement, embellishment and extension”.\textsuperscript{18} In Paris a housing competition was held which resulted in a band of subsidised housing around the city.

\textsuperscript{16} Arthur Henderson said in a letter to \textit{The Times} on 1 February 1918 “the unyielding attitude of the Government is bringing the country to the verge of an industrial revolution”; cf George Barnes statement “deficiency of housing accommodation is one of the most prolific causes of industrial unrest” (Swenarton (1981) 74)

\textsuperscript{17} Ward, S 2004 \textit{Planning and Urban Change} (London) 38

\textsuperscript{18} Slavitt (1994) 20
known as the Red Belt.\textsuperscript{19} The situations were not, however, analogous. Whilst Britain’s social and economic fibre required reconstruction, in mainland Europe the War had left physical scars. In France many took the view that the country as a whole had suffered on behalf of its capitol and, influenced by the thinking of Geddes, there was a move towards decentralisation with many more regional planning initiatives.\textsuperscript{20}

At the same time, devastated Continental cities required rebuilding. Perhaps the most prominent example of this Remis, where the famous Cathedral had been destroyed and 9,000 of the 14,000 original buildings had completely disappeared. Very few of those were in a repairable state.\textsuperscript{21} The French national society for post-war architectural reconstruction, \textit{La Rennaisance des Cités} employed the American planner and architect George B. Ford to mastermind the redevelopment. Ford’s was the first municipal plan submitted and approved by the national committee in Paris. He re-planned the city almost from scratch introducing open spaces, grouping together municipal buildings and creating four new districts, alternating between residential and industrial areas. The war’s destruction had thus provided a \textit{tabula rasa}, a rare opportunity for a new and exciting foray into planning practice. Ford had the opportunity to manifest his City Efficient philosophy and to demonstrate its advantages on the site of an ancient but inefficient city, thereby providing a model for reconstruction.

Many Belgians had sought refuge in Britain during the War. Hercule Poirot was famously just such a refugee.\textsuperscript{22} The need to rebuild their nation captured the imagination of British town planners, especially those involved with the Garden City Movement, and as a result in 1915 the Town Planning Institute and RIBA convened the Town Planning Conference on the Reconstruction of Belgium, attended by many of Belgium’s leading architects and planners. This resulted in the creation of the Belgian Town Planning Committee. The Committee had the support of the Belgian government and proposed to produce a national plan for Belgium, with the intention of rebuilding not just one city, but an entire nation, on Garden City lines.\textsuperscript{23} The plan never came to fruition. Whilst its prominent proponent Raphael Verwilghen became the Director of the \textit{Service des Constructions}, the Belgian nation was conservative and resistant to the

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\bibitem{19} Idem
\bibitem{20} Slavitt (1994) 12
\bibitem{21} Ibid 23
\bibitem{22} http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/13/hercule-poirot-real-life-model-belgian-gendarme
\bibitem{23} Uyttenhove, P (1990) \textit{The garden city education of Belgian planners around the First World War}, Planning Perspectives, 5:3, 277
\end{thebibliography}
outside influence of modern town planning. A few Garden Suburbs were built on the outskirts of cities like Ypres but in general the ideal remained unrealised. The importance of the intellectual dialogue that had taken place between Belgian and British planners should not, however, be overlooked. Whilst its real-world application in the wake of the First War may have been limited, it had prepared the ground for the much more modern approach to planning and reconstruction in Belgium which would follow World War II, just 25 years later.

Modernism and the Great War

In other parts of mainland Europe, the intellectual effect of war was quite different from in Belgium and resulted the rejection of tradition altogether. For many, the War had severely shaken, if not completely undermined their faith in traditional social hierarchies. The result was the burgeoning of new forms of modernist architecture and planning, epitomised by Le Corbusier’s idea for the Ville Contemporaine. Whilst the application of modernism in the wake of the First War was extremely limited, its emergence resulted directly from the spirit of a ‘new age’ that the War had produced. This again was a movement which would have very real implications for the construction of social housing following World War II.

A Green and Pleasant Land?

On the other hand, the Great War had resulted in an even deeper attachment to England’s ‘green and pleasant land’ in the collective British consciousness. War poets like Edward Thomas had added to the bucolic idyll that represented the English countryside. The idyll was, of course, far from new. Romantic poets and the likes of Constable had long established its identity. The idea of a ‘Green Belt’ too, predated the Great War being as it was an integral part of the Garden City ideology. War had made this commodity more precious and to some extent accounts for the post-war popularity of the garden suburb. Indeed, before the Second World War acts like the Town and Country Planning Act 1932, which legislated for the exclusion of advertisements in designated areas of countryside, had given the British preoccupation with protecting the countryside a statutory footing and by 1935 the London Regional Planning Committee had proposed the imposition of a Green belt around London.
**Conclusions**

The Great War played a very significant role in establishing contemporary town planning practices both in Britain and on the Continent. It firmly established the garden city/suburb as the model form of development (which in turn would lead to what Betjeman termed ‘Metroland’), provided the scope to experiment with modern planning ideas on the site of devastated European cities (which itself further fostered international cooperation amongst planners) and, perhaps most importantly, was the much needed catalyst for extending government and statutory intervention in British town planning.

**Looking Forwards**

Shortly before the outbreak of the Great War itself, on 20 January 1914, Sir Anston Webb set out an attractive picture of 21st century London, of London 2014, our London. His vision of “a belt of green round London” has been realised, and, despite two world wars, St Pauls still stands “safe for centuries”. In other respects the vision he presented is more than a little ambitious. Somewhat improbably, in Hollywood at least, Salmon fishing in the Yemen seems more likely than Salmon Fishing on the Thames.

Worryingly, the challenge that inspired the inception of contemporary planning a century ago remains amongst greatest challenges facing contemporary London, and British society as a whole: the provision of affordable housing. To an extent this is a direct result of Howard and Unwin’s proposals. A house with a pitched roof, a sitting room and a garden have for more than a century stood as the archetype of the English aspirational dwelling. A view reinforced by the emphasis on home ownership in the later twentieth century. Britons almost invariably prefer the ‘cottage-type’ home to the high rise flat, the local authority built versions of which to many represent the modern incarnation of the slum.

Moreover, the Green Belt has attained something of a mythical status, the un-impeachability of which makes it a noose round the neck of certain parts of the South East where finding land to meet housing supply is a near impossibility. Perhaps paradoxically, one answer to these problems lies in the Garden City ideal itself. The value of the Green Belt is in its amenity. Its purpose is to provide a recreational facility. It is not there simply to preserve the environs of those who can

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26 *The Spectator* 24 January 1914 119
afford to live in it. Howard envisaged Garden Cities interlacing across the countryside, rather than simply in isolation. Their predominant aim was to democratise green space, not mothball it.

Could a rejuvenated vision of the Garden City be part of the answer to the present day housing issue? In 2011 one of the 5 new developments selected by the Museum of Modern Art in New York for its exhibition *Foreclosed*, which sought innovative solutions to the housing crisis in the USA, was a ‘Nature City’ at Keizer, Oregon. This, its designers stated, was intended to be a modern reinvention of Howard’s original Garden City.\(^{27}\) Similarly, in the UK, the Planning and Design practice Urbed recently won the £250,000 Wolfson Economics Prize for answering the question “how would you deliver a new garden city?” With a snowflake shaped pattern of development to be grafted onto the edge of existing cities. These suggestions are more than merely academic. Just last month Nick Clegg pledged to build 5 new ‘Garden Cities’ between Oxford and Cambridge. Stripped back and revitalised, the Garden City may be making a comeback.

\(^{27}\) [http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/foreclosed/keizer](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/foreclosed/keizer)