

Create Streets
Essay

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Building better suburbs

A visit to Hampstead Garden Suburb

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Create Streets' senior architectural designer, Robert Kwolek, describes a visit to Hampstead Garden Suburb and explains what we can learn from the North London early 20th century community, revolutionary in its time and with plenty of lessons for us today.

You don't have to visit many new housing developments to know how disappointing most of them are: car dependent, lacking in greenery and slathered in tarmac, they're far from anything you'd want to walk to and definitely not attractive enough to want to walk through. The houses are cheaply built and either ugly or just bland. Things are getting a little better, slowly, but the exceptions are rare.



Bucolic homes in Hampstead Garden Suburb

On the verge of a nationwide boom of "garden villages" (a misnomer if ever there was one), we must do better to avoid the countryside and the edges of our towns and cities being filled with equally poor places to live and see. Most proposed garden villages will have more than 2,000 homes, some as

many as 10,000. These will be significant developments which frame the lives of many thousands of people. Building better, healthier and more beautiful new places should be the minimum bar we set for ourselves.

An urban designer's initial desire may be to build quite urban places, and Britain certainly isn't short of incredible urban examples from which to draw inspiration. The problem is that both the planning system and market forces move at a sluggish pace, so the slate of new towns is likely to still be quite suburban in nature. We're unlikely to see an urban new town the likes of Bath any time soon! How delightful it would be with Create Streets charged to plan and design it, but that may have to wait another generation.

It's crucial therefore that we build better suburbs, with mixed-use centres forming a real heart for communities. They must have amenities allowing daily errands to be accomplished by walking or cycling, such as supermarkets, GP clinics, schools, cafes, restaurants and workplaces. Places you can happily live in without using your car daily.

We've built places like this before, and not too long ago. In fact, Britain more than any other nation used to be very good at it. British architects all but invented the concept of garden suburbs and garden towns in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, with excellent examples



A map showing the bulk of Hampstead Garden Suburb, with Golders Green Station to the south. The plan shows its radial layout and generous green spaces, both public in the form of parks and open spaces and private in the form of large rear gardens.

like Bedford Park (1875 onwards), Letchworth Garden City (1904 onwards) and Hampstead Garden Suburb (1907 onwards). They influenced similar movements in Germany, France, the US and many other countries. Recently, I visited Hampstead Garden Suburb properly for the first time to see if it deserved its reputation and came away with the impression that (like Bedford Park which I live beside) it points the way to better new towns and better suburbs. I wish I'd visited earlier.



An early plan of Hampstead Garden Suburb. The legend attributes it to Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, with Lutyens listed as a consultant.

The edge of the Garden Suburb is only a few minutes' walk from Golders Green Station, though it's a good 20 minute walk to the "heart" of the development, Central Square, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, along with a duo of churches and a school (originally The Institute, an adult education centre). The square itself doesn't fulfil the traditional role of a town square, however, as it has no commercial uses. Those, limited as they are, are found west in a dedicated group of buildings along busy Finchley Road. Today, they feel removed from most of the development, but this is largely the fault of Finchley Road not being as attractive a street as it could be. This is surprising given the area's affluence but the street is too wide and the buildings are tired, the shopfronts in need of rejuvenation.

Not including cafes and restaurants around the Central Square may seem to have been a mistake, though separating the spiritual from the commercial was probably an aim of the Garden Suburb's founder, Henrietta Barnett. A vicar's wife, she had first hand experience of the poverty in her husband's Whitechapel parish. The couple owned a house overlooking Hampstead Heath, so when Eton College put 243 acres of land for sale, she was eager to build a community for the poor and well-to-do alike, in attractive green surroundings on generous plots of land among open spaces and allotment



A cluster of buildings along Finchley Road was the original gateway into Hampstead Garden Suburb, and the only location of shops and offices. It doesn't seem to play that role too effectively today. It was built on the edge of the development's first phase. Today it is quite removed not just from Central Square but from most of the development.

gardens. It was Barnett who believed the land should be planned as a whole, appointing Raymond Unwin as masterplanner. Barnett set up the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust, whose successor continues to manage the estate to this day.

The unique plan, especially by the standards of the day, required a private bill before Parliament as the design was counter to local bylaws which at the time mandated a dense network of terraced streets. The resulting Hampstead Garden Suburb Act 1906 called for an average housing density no greater than eight houses per acre and a distance of at least fifty feet between houses (except in cul-de-sacs). It allowed for tree-lined streets and for less land to be taken up by roads and more for gardens and open spaces. The Act paved the way (no pun intended) for the 1909 Housing and Town Planning Act and inspired London County Council estates for years to come. Similarities are also easy to spot with ubiquitous 1930s housing throughout outer London.

That separation of activities has led to a very quiet and peaceful community, with little traffic even in the middle of a sunny weekend afternoon. However, with the tube far for most residents and only two bus routes, most residents own cars. According to TFL data, car ownership is 69 percent in Barnet and



Edwin Lutyen's St Jude's Church terminates the vista at the end of Heathgate (left) and Central Square and the Henrietta Barnett School (right), also by Lutyens

it's certainly higher in the affluent Garden Suburb. East Finchley Station is close to the northern edge, though it's made inaccessible by the wide and busy A1 road. The south and east border two golf courses, so access to public transport is not a strong point in the area. Still, it's miles above what you'd find in outer London suburbs, not to mention new housing developments outside of London.

Niggles aside, I'd like to focus on the lessons we can learn from Hampstead Garden Suburb, because it offers many and at 5,000 homes it's similar in size to many of the proposed "garden villages."



A group of large semi-detached and terraced Arts & Crafts style houses around a private garden square



Further examples of Arts & Crafts houses

For fans of Arts & Crafts architecture such as myself, Hampstead Garden Suburb encompasses many delightful examples. Homes of brick, render and tiles, with large dormers, deep eaves and whimsical ornament are common, with equally good simpler homes of fine proportions abundant, too. The odd neo-Georgian home has its place, too, especially around Central Square (that'll be the Lutyens influence).



Neo-Georgian houses along North Square and South Square

Homes are clearly well constructed and still look in excellent condition after a century or more. That's a lesson for developers today: build well and build beautifully and you'll create places people want to cherish and nurture.

What really sets it apart, however, is how well various house types mix together; streets of large detached homes interspersed with semi-detached homes and terraces grouped around greens and garden squares. There are even a few small apartment buildings. The lack of house types in new developments is particularly egregious but in the Garden Suburb it not only makes for more interesting streets, but a more socially and economically diverse community (even if it's not quite the socially mixed community today which Barnett envisioned due to high London property prices and particularly high demand for this neighbourhood).



Terraced housing on Erskine Hill (left) and Linnell Close (right)

Walking the streets is pleasant. They're green, bordered by hedges and trees, benches seemingly on every street corner. One is never more than a couple of street blocks from a park, whether the 18 acre Big Wood, Central Square or the boundless extant of Hampstead Heath on the doorstep. The "open space provision" (in modern planning parlance) must be quite similar to that required in a modern development. Narrow streets allow for on-street parking, some on both sides, and streets allow for two-way movement though they're too narrow for both cars to pass at higher speeds (not a bad thing).



There are no dull, repetitive streets. The abundant greenery has further softened contrasts between the various styles, leading to streets which feel holistic and organic.



A really nice precedent for new developments: benches on nearly every street corner, offering residents a place to rest while on a walk.

There are many garden squares large and small spread throughout the Garden Suburb, breaking up blocks and offering a variety of housing types.



Linnell Close



Meadway Court



North Square



Bigwood Road



Lucas Square



Corringham Road



Streets are exceptionally green in Hampstead Garden Suburb. Some are narrow lanes, others wider with on-street parking. Border hedges are a hallmark throughout.



Compared to driveways in new housing developments, a sea of tarmac from house to house, driveways in Hampstead Garden Suburb (left) are attractive, permeable, have space for border planting and garages are often tucked away from view. Another common parking arrangement are parking courtyards (right) at the end of what are essentially mini cul de sacs, but their scale, greenery and border treatment make them feel more village-like than suburban.

Hampstead Garden Suburb isn't perfect but we'd be lucky if our modern housing developments were even half as well designed. Excellent principles which have been upheld for over a century mean it's just as pleasant now as ever, not suffering from the degradation one often sees in post-war suburbs.

Henrietta Barnett's ethos of a mixed community has made for a more attractive place than nearly everything we build today. Eventually, we may want to build places even denser, or at least with denser parts, but building places similar to Hampstead Garden Suburb would be a good start. Ideally they would have similar access to employment opportunities and public transport so they can be walkable, enjoyable places to live, even for those who don't own cars.

If we wished, we could make somewhere even better, with streets not quite so wide, pavements wider, with better cycling provision and a true heart to the community ringed by shops and cafes. There's no reason modern housebuilders couldn't do this if they had the ambition to create beautiful places and invest both in the streetscape and in the design of homes. Will planners, traffic engineers and housebuilders be up to the task and will changes to national planning policy and the rollout of good design codes come quickly enough? Soon, the new towns will get going and we'll see. We need to get back to building places, not just "housing." It would be rather nice indeed if a new-build estate could once again be a beautiful, aspirational place to buy or rent a home.

Five key takeaways from my visit

1. I wish it didn't need to be said, but architecture matters. Beautiful homes with attractive front gardens, nice boundary treatment and plenty of space for greenery really matters. It makes all the difference.
2. A mix of housing types makes for a community for everyone. It allows for people of various stages of life to make a home and live their lives. We need a mix of flats, small and large homes.
3. Neighbourhoods need a mix of street types, too, from slightly busier primary routes to quiet local streets to secluded narrow lanes.
4. Greenery should be integrated throughout neighbourhoods, both as more formal garden squares, parks of various sizes and wild spaces.
5. We should never assume that just because we've lost our way in recent decades means we should give up on building places people are proud to call home.

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All photos the author's own.



Corringham Road

GET IN TOUCH

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