

Create Streets  
Essay

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# Creating a new town:

Lessons from Letchworth Garden City







## Foreword

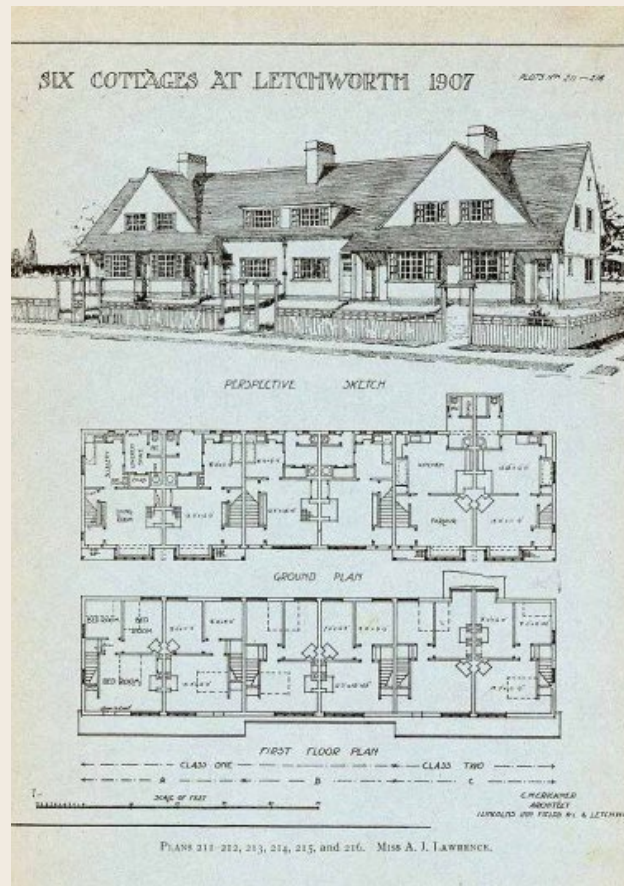
Here in the UK, the new Labour Government is shortly expected to announce further details about its New Town plans. Whether these take the form of standalone "towns" or something more akin to urban extensions, or perhaps a combination of both, is yet to be seen.

Of course, the concept of "new towns" is nothing new. The name is best known applied to the programme of new towns started immediately following World War II under the New Towns Act 1946. Well-known towns built under the Act include Stevenage, Crawley, Hemel Hempstead and Basildon, among others. Later new towns included Milton Keynes and Peterborough.

The long term success of some of these is debatable, but they were not the first new towns. Long before, Port Sunlight and Bournville provided a model for Letchworth (1903) and Welwyn (1920), a model which was replicated not just in the UK but around the world.

Will the next wave of new towns merely aim to provide as many houses as possible or will they, like Letchworth, aim for a higher purpose of social and cultural enrichment, beauty and substantially improved standards for affordable new homes? Will they be the reset the UK housing market needs, or just more of the same?

In this illustrated essay, I write about the background of Letchworth Garden City and my personal experience visiting it, and see what lessons we might glean to apply to the new towns of the future.



*Plans for cottages at Letchworth*

# Creating a new town:

## Lessons from Letchworth Garden City

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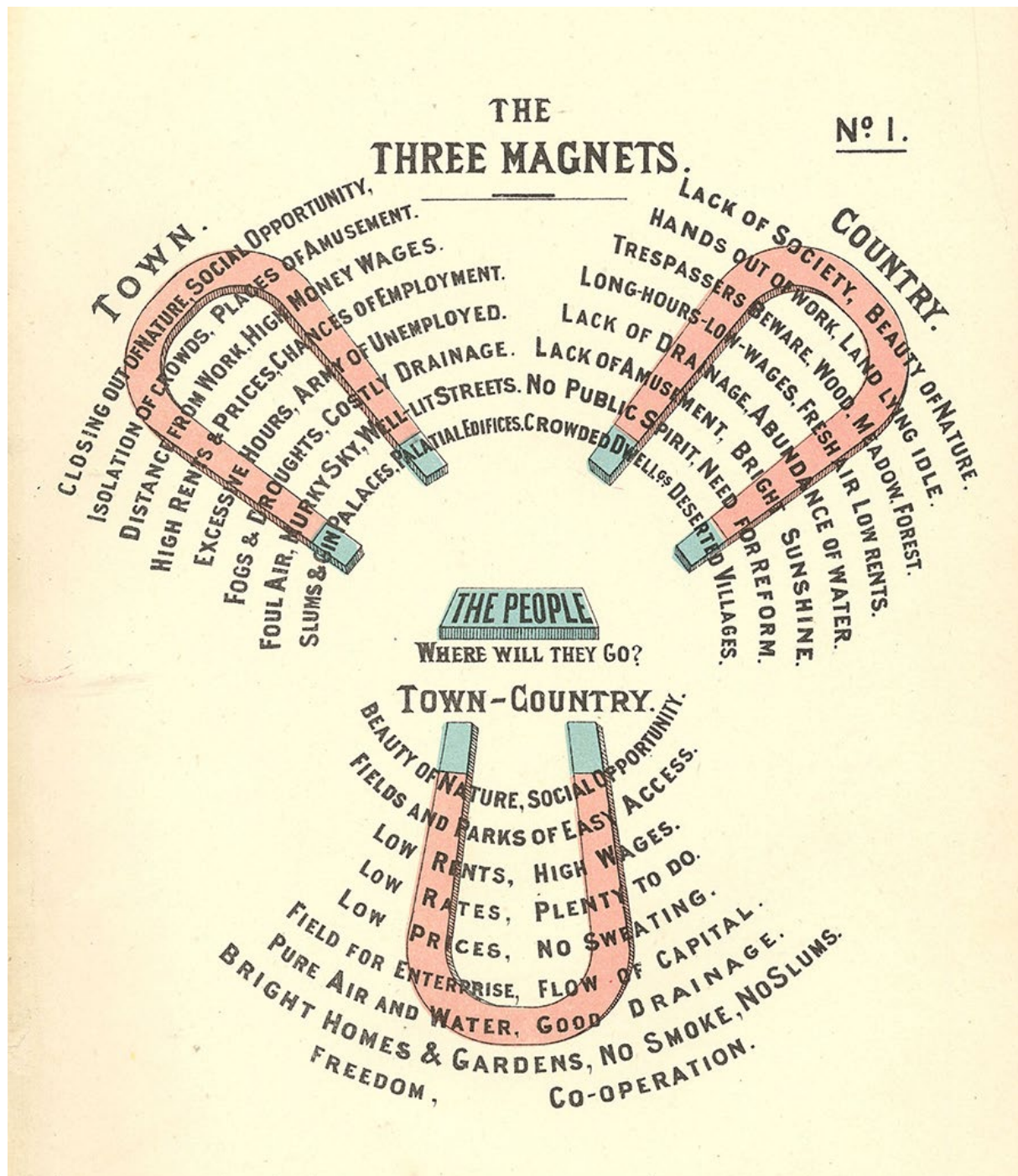


**Imagine you had the chance to create a new town from scratch. You could do anything you want and design it according to your own vision. That's nearly what Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker had the opportunity to do at Letchworth Garden City, the precursor of Hampstead Garden Suburb about which I have previously written. The two are very different, however, and not just because one is a London suburb and the other a standalone town.**

Letchworth Garden City was founded in 1903, when Ebenezer Howard and his supporters founded a company called First Garden City Limited and purchased Letchworth and the parishes of William and Norton. Howard had already gained renown following the publication of his book, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, in 1898. It was reprinted in 1902, this time with a new title, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, paving the way for the garden city movement. The book reflected Howard's dissatisfaction with cities of the time, especially industrial cities with their urban poverty, overcrowding, low wages, pollution and poor access to nature. He wanted to create new settlements which combined the best of both worlds: the opportunity, amusement and good wages of the town with the beauty, fresh air and low rents of the country.

Those ideals were realised in their purest form in early garden cities such as Letchworth and Welwyn and proved influential beyond England's borders with garden cities such as Hellerau in Germany, Suresnes outside Paris and Forest Hills Gardens in New York. Less fortunately, in a less idealised form garden cities would eventually morph into the New Towns of the post-WWII era and the worst (as well as the best) of the suburbs we know today.

Unwin and Parker won a competition to design Letchworth's layout in 1904 and the first houses were occupied later that year, before the town was even named. Regular train service from the newly opened station came in 1905, the same year the first of the Cheap Cottages Exhibitions was held. This was a contest for architects and builders to design an innovative home for no more than £150, about £15,000 in today's money according to the Bank of England's inflation calculator. Sponsored by the Daily Mail, some 60,000 visitors came to the exhibition.



*Ebenezer Howard's diagram of the Three Magnets exemplifies combining the best of town and country into an idealised settlement.*





*A vintage postcard promoting the Cheap Cottages Exhibition (left) and a plaque identifying a home from the exhibition (right).*



*Three charming homes dating from the Exhibition. Imagine a home like this for £15,000!*

Providing employment was always an important piece of the puzzle. The founders understood that good jobs were essential to sustain the new town. To that end, Letchworth's large industrial zone, to the town's east, was developed alongside homes, and some employment centres were aligned with the town's social values. The development of the industrial area was led by Walter Gaunt, previously a manager at Trafford Park in Manchester, the first planned industrial estate in the world. Gaunt convinced the publishers J M Dent to move from their cramped quarters in London. Other early takers included WH Smith, Edmundsbury Weavers and motor manufacturers. All this resulted in a new community of homes, employment, retail and leisure: all the ingredients of a well-rounded, sustainable place.

The most impressive industrial building in Letchworth is the Spirella Building, once home to the Spirella Company of Great Britain, a manufacturer of bespoke corsets. The company was founded by an American entrepreneur, William Wallace Kincaid, who set up in Letchworth after hearing about the unique new community. It grew to about 2,000 employees but closed

after demand for corsets disappeared post-war. Today it is a business centre owned by the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation. Twenty businesses are apparently inside. What a lovely place to work.



*The Spirella Building, designed by Cecil Horace Hignett and completed in 1920.*



*A promotional poster for Letchworth.*

First Garden City Limited was taken over in 1960, leading to significant changes in management and aggravating local residents. After successfully securing an Act of Parliament, ownership of the estate was transferred to a public sector body in 1963, before again being replaced by a charitable body, in 1995. This new body, the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, continues to manage the estate to this day.

One immediately knows Letchworth is not an ordinary place from the moment of arrival at the train station, the station sign proclaiming, 'The World's First Garden City.' The station has some fine brickwork in a vague Arts & Crafts style. Out of the station, however, the

first impression is mixed. A poor new commercial building greets you to your left, then a busy road beyond a clump of trees.





*The public space which greets you as you make your way from the train station.*

The impression recovers on the other side of the road. The small public space and the commercial streets of Leys Avenue and Eastcheap were finely paved in Yorkstone as part of a recent shared surface scheme which included concrete planters. The overall impression is of a well-cared for place, though it is a shame the street furniture is blandly generic rather than delicately fitting in with the enclosing Arts & Crafts buildings. One cannot help preferring the streets in their earlier years (pictured) with their generous green verges and cast-iron railing borders. Details matter.



*Leys Avenue today (left) and as it looked around 1913 (right).*



Overall, the town centre has promise and on a sunny Sunday afternoon in early February the various coffee shops and pubs along its length were reasonably busy. A tighter grouping of the town centre would be better though. It is oddly configured with commercial uses spread over four streets rather than being concentrated along a High Street or around a town square. There are four 'sort-of' high streets, none quite sure what kind of street they want to be. Leys Avenue is the most successful and also the most attractive, with good Arts & Crafts architecture and quite a few original surviving shopfronts. Sadly, the same cannot be said for Station Road, Eastcheap and Broadway. Station Road is busy with traffic and has a number of empty shopfronts, while Eastcheap has a good mix of businesses but far too many ugly post-war buildings and faceless shopfronts.



*The public space which greets you as you make your way from the train station.*



*Beautifully restored buildings and planters (left) and a coffee shop on Leys Avenue (right).*



*Mixed-use buildings on Eastcheap, some reflecting an Arts & Crafts quality but others far less so.*

The large Garden Square Shopping Centre has seen better days and has unattractive entrances at various points along Leys Avenue and Eastcheap. It is an even less attractive neighbour to bordering residential areas. Generally, the newer public buildings are pretty poor, a shadow of what they should be. The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation should take a far more confident and assertive role on the quality of new development. Some surgical replacements to bad recent buildings would help everyone.



*The Leys Avenue entrance into Garden Square Shopping Centre (left) and the back entrance along Gernon Road (right), which faces a street of houses.*



*The multi-storey car park creates an inactive street frontage but there are worse backs to car parks (left). Sadly, Letchworth Police Station (right) is just a box.*

On my visit, I made the mistake of continuing down Broadway afterwards. By design and intent, this should be the town centre's main thoroughfare. It is not, however. It has an odd relationship with the town centre, bisected by large parking lots and buildings spaced too far apart. It is a real missed opportunity. Designed as the main arterial route, it has a few older buildings near the train station but otherwise is lined with postwar buildings of little distinction. It feels like the town is slipping through your fingers as you walk south.



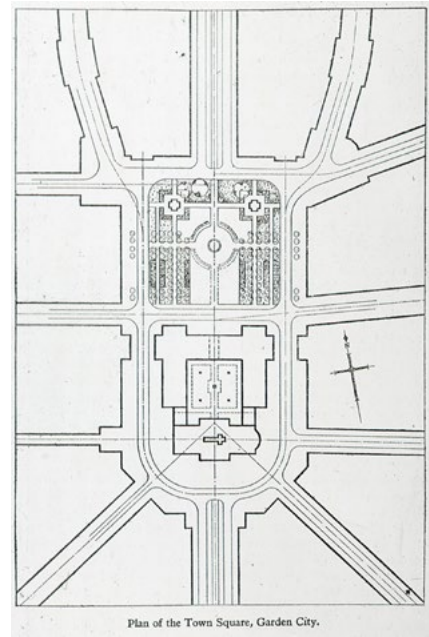
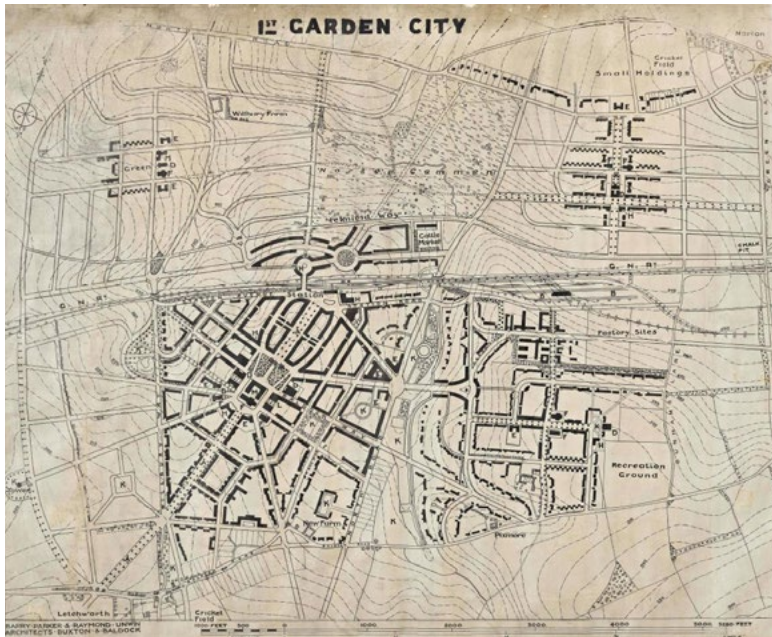


*Post-war Arena Parade (left) is bordered by a large car park, but some of the older buildings along Broadway (right) are very handsome.*



*The Broadway Hotel (left) and Broadway (right).*

Further south, Broadway Gardens is something of a non-space. Little more than a large field of grass with a fountain at the end, it is too large by a factor of at least three. No one was there when I visited. Here, too, the rate of initial build-out severely hampered plans. Broadway Gardens was originally to be far smaller and surrounded by municipal buildings, a public hall, museum, schools and a post office. Only the town hall, a library and school were built, and all are far too set back from the green space. Today, it is poorly enclosed by buildings which are too small for the enlarged space. A few ugly modern buildings have also managed to sneak their way in. If only the size had been kept small and architectural standards upheld, it could have been a beautiful civic space. Hopefully the mistakes of the past can be rectified some day.



*Parker and Unwin's original 1904 plan for Letchworth was for a more compact development with a denser core and a garden square bordered by civic buildings (left), while a later plan shows a smaller Broadway Gardens bordered by a municipal building (right).*



*In 1925 Broadway was still just a country lane with hardly any buildings, as most development was concentrated to the east, between the train station and the industrial zone.*



*The Town Hall and Broadway Cinema together form a fine urban duo, though they are a bit 'lost in space' in their current location, between Broadway Gardens and car infrastructure.*





*Broadway Gardens is much too large as a public space, but an even weaker point are some of the recent buildings. Far from being Arts & Crafts, they're about as non-descript as buildings get.*

Further south still, beyond Broadway Gardens, I got my first taste of the suburban nature which much of Letchworth was later to assume.



*The magnificent avenue of trees along the southern portion of Broadway (left) and one of the best civic buildings in Letchworth, St Francis' College (right).*

Undoubtedly, the highlights of Letchworth are the earlier residential areas, and the older the better in my view. From modest rows of cottages to exceptionally fine larger houses, the aspiration of its founders for a socially mixed and attractive community is evident in its earlier homes.



*Small courtyard blocks such as this were among my favourite homes and with their communal gardens seem to exemplify the ethos of the development better than detached homes do.*





*Typical streets to the south east of the centre, tree-lined with generous green verges.*



*An early group of cottages (left) and Ridge Avenue (right).*



*Pixmore Way (left) and Norton Way (right).*



*A Swiss chalet style home and a rendered semi-detached pair.*





*A green along Ridge Road, east of the city centre, one of the several throughout Letchworth, is really emblematic of the cottage style of earlier homes.*



*These cottages off Ridge Road transport one back in time in the best possible way (left) and a tree-lined suburban street (right).*



*Meadow Way Green, while not radical in its planning, was built as housing for single women, with a communal dining room in use until the 1970s.*





*Letchworth is at its best in the pedestrian focused areas, such as this group of cottages (left) and the secluded nature of this pedestrian-only cottage court off Lytton Avenue (right).*

The most attractive of the homes are very similar to those found in Hampstead Garden Suburb. Steeply pitched clay tiled roofs, roughcast render and timber casement windows reflect the simple vernacular of the modest Arts & Crafts cottages, while larger homes often feature fine brickwork or timber cladding and attractive dormer windows. While uPVC windows are unfortunately quite common now, mercifully most doors appear to be original.



*Beautiful Arts & Crafts doors.*



*Semi-detached homes on Field Lane have just a hint of the Arts & Crafts, but otherwise excellent windows and fine detailing.*





*There's a mix of architectural styles among the homes, some more vernacular, others more Georgian, but they fit together well.*

So lovely homes but small changes could make Letchworth the town so much better. It should have been built more tightly in the middle. It's too late to change that but the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation really should be managing the streets and new buildings much more tightly. The public realm is often not good enough and new buildings are largely poor. I don't think they are living up to their important legacy.

Letchworth is close to London, less than 30 minutes by train from King's Cross, but still feels a world away in its wealth and energy. Four of five of North Hertfordshire's most deprived areas are in Letchworth. Average household income in Letchworth is lower than the regional and national averages after accounting for housing costs. Social housing was part of the original fabric of Letchworth and today 31 percent of the population still lives in social housing (compared to the national average of 18 percent). Yet, Letchworth has few options for private rent, with only 10 percent of residents renting privately. Young people are often forced to leave for lack of living options.<sup>1</sup> It is largely a case of 'rent it socially' or 'own it'. Does the social fabric risk ripping in the middle?



*Semi-detached cottages and terraced houses on Spring Road.*



*Groups of bungalows*

Looking at old photos of Letchworth, it is hard not to think that its sense of place seems to have diminished over the years. The sense of community and of a fresh new place bound by a common vision was palpable, but since then utopia has got a little lost among the tarmac driveways, ugly insertions and 'could be anywhere' street signs. What were once quiet rural lanes with cyclists and children walking down the middle are now tarmac, clutter and cars. Letchworth still has heart but it needs more oxygen.



*A 1911 photograph of Westholm Green (left) and Norton Way around 1930 (right).*



*An aerial photograph from 1925 (left) showing how little had been developed around Broadway Gardens at the time, and a later photograph (right) showing a tree-lined Station Road.*





*It is good to see some of the original community buildings have survived. Pictured is The Settlement, today an adult education centre but once the Skittles Inn, a 'teetotal pub' which hosted dances, lectures and trade union meetings.*



*Even schools were built in an Arts & Crafts style. Testament to their enduring beauty, some have now been converted to homes, such as the example on the left. Beauty always trumps utility in the long run.*



*Older streets (left) have generous pavements while in areas on the edge of the city (right), if they have pavements at all, many are narrow strips barely wide enough for one person.*





*Hitchin Road, a busy A road (left) and the wide junction with Broadway (right).*




*Impressive large houses along Broadway. It is just a shame pavements for pedestrians are lacking on one side of the street.*



*While it may be quite car-centric, there is an impressive fabric of pedestrian lanes offering shortcuts throughout the city, something I took advantage often.*





The phrase which kept coming back to me as I walked around Letchworth was 'lost opportunity.' It started so well and had great promise but it got a little lost along the way. You can easily see as you walk outwards from the centre how much better the older parts are: denser, with better architecture more aligned with the vision of a garden city. It dissolves into a generic low-density suburb after about half a mile and once the post-war development starts it is, tragically, game over. The original vision has been diluted from a teetotal ambrosia to flavoured water, but much is still lovely and what an amazing place it might have been if they had dared to hold to the original standards.

Perhaps the most significant lesson of Letchworth is how the idea of what a 'garden city' is has changed quite dramatically over the years from Parker and Unwin's original vision. It is a vision you can trace in the timeline of Letchworth's development. It went from still being a 'city' with a proper centre surrounded by terraced houses on informal streets to a less dense, more formal place of almost exclusively detached houses. The original streets are easy and pleasant to walk in; the newer streets far less so.

The buildings relate to each other in the older parts, sitting along streets composed within the landscape with a clear vision and bisected by attractive parks. The later sections are more formal, almost boring. Even where the houses are large and attractive, the relationship between home and street is undefined. Footpaths are narrow or non-existent. What was a 'city' which prioritised strong community turned into a collection of individual houses. There's nothing wrong with larger homes and larger gardens. People like suburbs but, in a pattern which would be accelerated in the post-war years here and everywhere else the public realm fell by the wayside as the private realm triumphed.

Something else which is patently obvious is just how quickly domestic architecture deteriorated after World War II. This was not so obvious in Hampstead Garden Suburb, where the greater demand for housing in London meant the development was built out quite quickly, mostly before the war. Letchworth grew more slowly, however, with many post-war houses built either further out from the centre or as infill development between the older parts.

Seemingly with each decade the houses became less attractive, more cheaply built and on ever larger plots of land. Unlike the original Arts & Crafts houses, they look like any other houses of their decade, the kind you can find anywhere up and down the country. It is a real shame that First Garden City Ltd and its predecessors were unable or unwilling to retain

greater control over the architecture and urban design in the post-war years. The city abandoned those qualities which made it special. The way in which newer houses were laid out diluted the character and identity of Letchworth as a garden city and turned it into a generic suburb. Suburbs can be great but Letchworth could have been greater.

The varying character has resulted in a less obvious identity than in Hampstead, where the Arts & Crafts character of homes is strongly felt throughout and makes it truly unique. The good news is that Letchworth could be improved so easily and made safer and much more valuable for existing residents at very little cost. A design code setting out the materials and details which conform with the original architectural vision or a version of it for new buildings would really help. Some post-war buildings should be replaced or refaced when the opportunity arises. And there are opportunities for beautiful new public buildings and infill housing, though current residents would have to agree. A lot could be taken from the archives! There are also real opportunities to improve the design and management of Letchworth's streets. More verges please and some roads could do with a diet.




*Opinions of the quality of the architecture aside, post-WWII houses in Letchworth have none of the unique character of the city's early Arts & Crafts houses. They look like postwar houses anywhere else in the country.*



*While good to see attempts at preserving an Arts & Crafts style with some of the new buildings, they also make painfully obvious how ill-equipped architects and builders are today to recreate the same quality as in the past.*





Please do not misunderstand me. Letchworth is lovely. It could just be so much better. I hope that's a lesson not just for local councillors and the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, but for councillors and officials throughout the UK.

I wish we had a bit more of Letchworth's original spirit today. In the hands of a few major housebuilders and a planning system still too risky, expensive and burdensome for smaller builders and self-builders to compete, we create too few homes and too much 'housing.' Homes are not just a commodity. They are not 'units.' What we need is a little of the garden city movement's altruism and aspirations: for nature and beauty, homes and jobs, justice, neighbourhood and community.

*Robert Kwolek is a senior architectural designer at Create Streets.*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.leitchworth.com/sites/default/files/documents/2018-07/LG-CHF\\_GardenCityReport2018\\_A5\\_DIGITAL.pdf](https://www.leitchworth.com/sites/default/files/documents/2018-07/LG-CHF_GardenCityReport2018_A5_DIGITAL.pdf)

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Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation: <https://www.leitchworth.com/>

Herts Memories: <https://www.hertsmemories.org.uk/>







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