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Disney's garden suburb in Celebration, Florida. // Courtesy Robert A.M. Stern

Why the 'Garden City' Is Making an Unlikely Comeback

ANTHONY FLINT MAY 28, 2014

"Suburbs are like cholesterol," says Robert A.M. Stern — there's good and there's bad, all to be sensibly calibrated.

I am finding my way past the Diane von Furstenberg table settings, Viking stoves and Knoll chairs at the Architectural Digest Home Show in New York City, cradling Robert A.M. Stern's 12-pound, 1,000 page book, *Paradise Planned: The Garden Suburb and the Modern City*, and wondering if this could possibly be worth it, trying to understand the evolution of human settlement.

The rendezvous with Stern, the dean of the Yale Architecture School and anti-starchitect of traditional design — he is the keynote speaker at the [Congress for the New Urbanism in Buffalo](#) at the beginning of June — was at the Potterton Books library at a far end of the tradeshow floor, decked out like the reading room of a Hudson River mansion. The interview was wedged in between book signings and a rollout of his [furniture line](#), and yes, Stern was sporting his signature brightly colored socks, a tulip yellow.

“Whatever else, one cannot say that Zaha Hadid is cozy.”

Stern has written many large books, but with *Paradise Planned*, he is on a particular mission: to celebrate the 19th century town planning movement, and suggest the century-old template holds useful lessons for 21st century development.

To understand his zeal, however, one must begin with another author, and one who most definitely did not wear bright socks. Ebenezer Howard, who published *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* in 1902, had a day job in record-keeping for the English Parliament. A reader of Edward Bellamy, Henry George, and Karl Marx, he sought an equitable and sustainable model of urban expansion, at a time when central cities were bedeviled by congestion and squalor. Though in the profession of planning he is the equivalent of a rock star, Howard brought an accountant's sensibility to the task. His diagrams are classic quaint Victorian, no-nonsense flow charts showing circles of settlement ringed by greenbelts and connected by transit corridors. The ideal garden city, a blend of town and country, had 30,000 inhabitants, on roughly 6,000 acres, with a density of about 30 units per 2.5 acres, and a range of housing types to accommodate different incomes. The utopia was scientifically based, designed to be repeatable, and evaluated on solid metrics.

The first garden city was Letchworth, England, financed by Cadbury Chocolates and Lever Soap; in the U.S., arguably the most recognized version of the model is [Greenbelt, Maryland](#), planned by Rexford Guy Tugwell, and part and parcel of the New Deal era of affordable housing initiatives; FDR thought the idea was swell. The traditional layout in this basic blueprint — a central square hosting civic institutions and boulevards radiating out — can be seen in Canberra, Australia, and more recently, the New Urbanist community of Seaside, Florida.

Stern's book is an encyclopedia of other versions throughout the world: nearly 1,000 of them, in 25 countries. So could it be that this is a model that actually works pretty well?

The gambit is to rescue an august planning tradition "tragically interrupted" by 20th century modernism, though there is a little bit of Ebenezer Howard in some of the modernists Stern disdains, Le Corbusier's Chandigarh in India being one example. Demographic and market trends have bolstered the center city, but Stern argues there is plenty of room to grow differently — to blend town and country all over again.

"There are vast swaths of abandoned land that are not going to be redeveloped as skyscraper neighborhoods," says Stern. Legacy cities such as Detroit may be perfect testing grounds, he argues, not least because the infrastructure is in place for a reinvention of the urban grid. The key ingredients in the recipe — a town square, a church, a transit station, a corner store, hotel, smaller houses (think Forest Hills in Queens) — need only be dispensed in quantities that are not as intensive as Midtown Manhattan. "It's not rocket science," he says, suggesting that Jane Jacobs was "too dismissive" of development outside the core. "Suburbs are like cholesterol," Stern says — there's good and there's bad, all to be sensibly calibrated.

The equity argument, very much *de rigeur* among planners these days, may be the most powerful. From San Francisco to New York to Paris, booming cities are staggeringly unaffordable. More attention to a diversity of housing types, and a little less concentration, may create places for average folk. "I don't mean to sound all de Blasio," he says, referring to New York's equity-minded new mayor, "but there's a little bit of that."

The academic establishment tends to overlook the town-and-country template largely because of the use of traditional architecture, Stern says. But neotraditional design can make people feel comfortable, as part of a community. "Whatever else, one cannot say that Zaha Hadid is cozy. It may be great for an opera or a swim meet, but you don't want to go home to one of those things."

The campaign thus has an attention-getting contrarian platform, beyond the punching bag of modernism: don't give up the suburbs for dead, and enough about reviving central cities, already. *Paradise Planned* is a welcome addition to the discourse and a semester's worth of bedtime reading, if you can just get it home. Fortunately for me, there was no shortage of sturdy tote bags, so I could lug the subversive tome out onto the busy streets of Manhattan.

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