

MESHING-IN PLOTS

This is the third article in our series about re-imagining the Garden City for today's issues, explaining ERE's complex systems approach through our RIBA competition-winning scheme for expanding the world's first Garden City at Letchworth in the UK. The series builds up the scheme through interactions between subsystems, starting with those that are longest-lived and progressively meshing-in faster-changing ones. We have now reached the stage of meshing-in building plots, to achieve the most positive relationships with the long-lasting network of natural infrastructure and streets we developed in the last article (Fig.1).

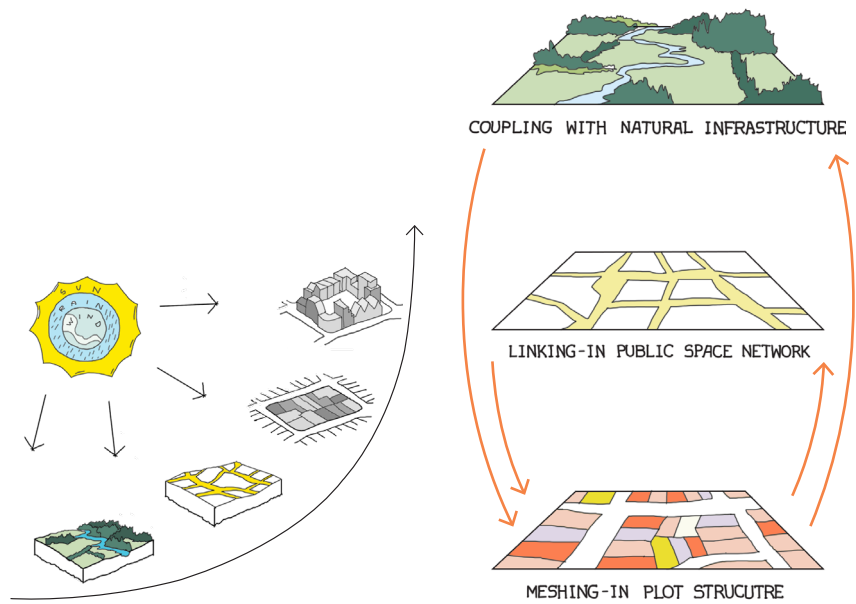


Fig.1 Article's focus: meshing-in plots with the landscape and street networks

PLOTS FOR LIVELY STREETS

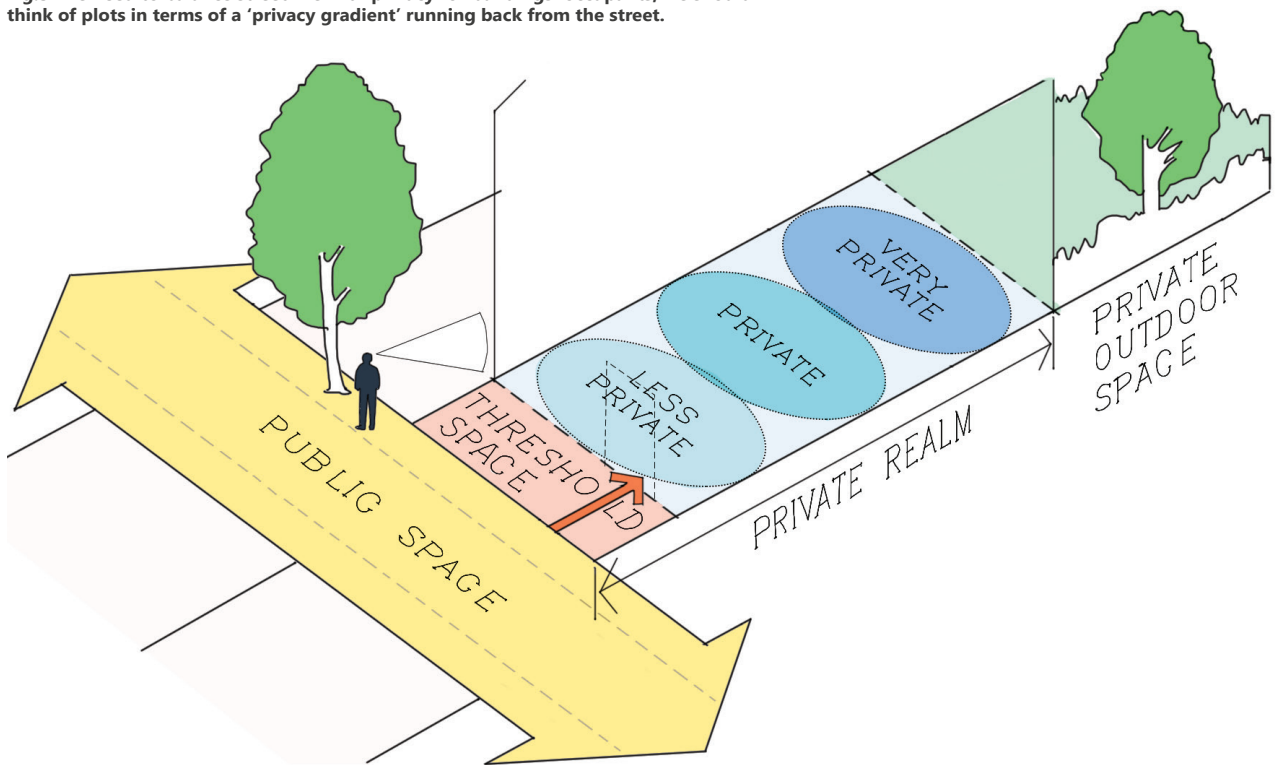
The relationship between plots and streets affects the street experience in important ways. Each plot can only guarantee one entrance; so the narrower the plots, all else being equal, the more frequent the entrances. Plot width is therefore key to the liveliness of the street: the narrower the plots, the more frequent the entrances, and the more lively the street (Fig.2).

The liveliness of the street also depends on the nature of the activities within each plot at its interface with the street. Activities that require relatively little security or privacy can open directly to the street, adding to the street's liveliness with 'active fronts', whilst activities that require more privacy or security have to be sheltered from the public gaze, away from the street towards the back of the plot. This means that plots need clearly-distinguished 'fronts' facing the street, and 'backs' facing away from it (Fig.3; see overleaf).



Fig.2 (Top) Narrow plots, many entrances, active fronts: A lively street; (Bottom) One wide plot with a single entrance and inactive front: A dead street

Fig.3 The need to balance street-life with privacy for buildings' occupants, we should think of plots in terms of a 'privacy gradient' running back from the street.

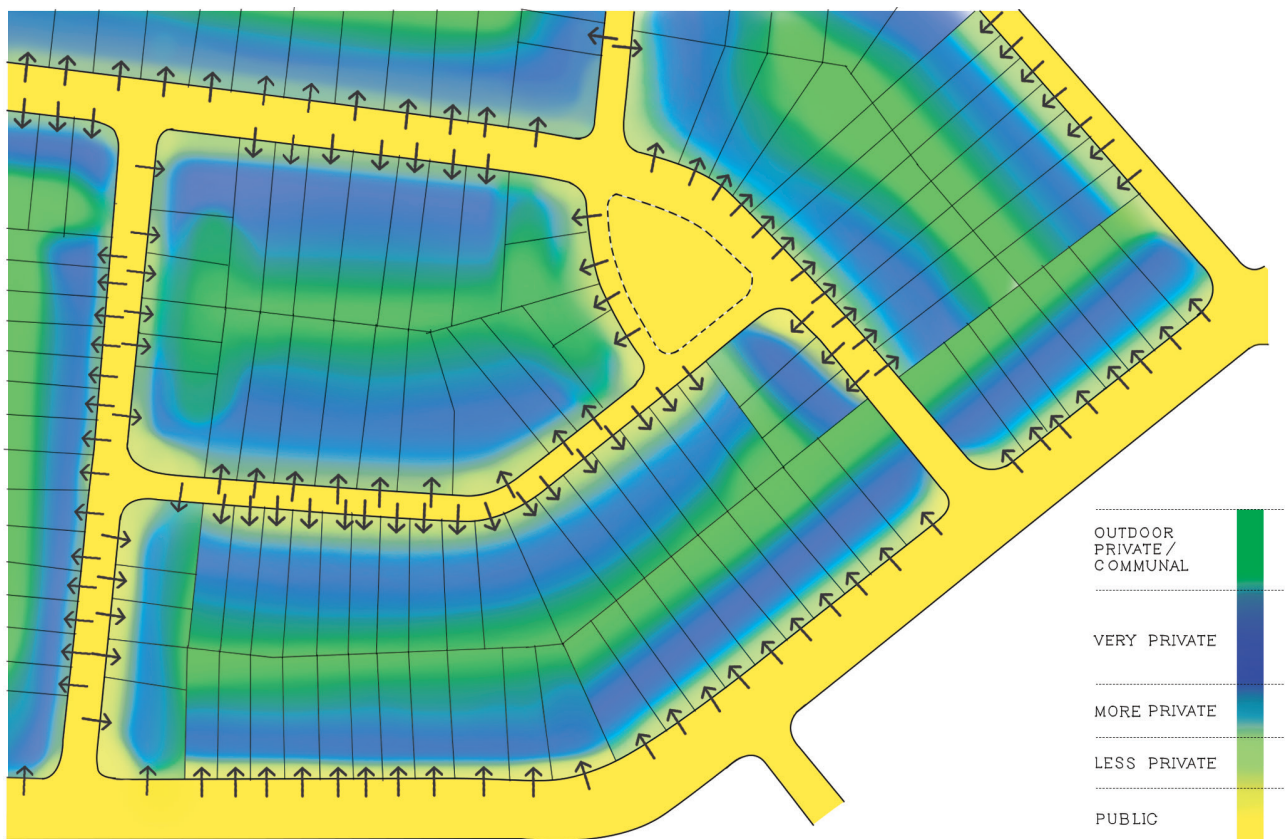


THE PERIMETER BLOCK

In our last article, we explained the fundamental importance of highly-connected street systems. Now we must mesh these with plots which have active fronts and private backs. The only way

of consistently achieving this is through ring-like arrangements of plots that we call 'perimeter blocks' (Fig.4). The perimeter block, therefore, is the fundamental design strategy for creating highly-connected but lively street networks.

Fig.4 Perimeter development's ring-like arrangement of plots and privacy gradient



REIMAGINING COMMUNAL SPACES

The perimeter block creates lively streets by maintaining a 'privacy gradient' in which spaces outside it are public, whilst spaces inside it accommodate more private outdoor activities. The UK has a long-standing tradition of dividing these more-private spaces into separate gardens for each plot, but Raymond Unwin, planner of the first Garden City at Letchworth, emphasised the advantages of a more cooperative approach¹; suggesting that perimeter blocks might also contain shared outdoor spaces,

larger than those that any individual could afford. 'Through the medium of cooperation', as he put it, 'all may enjoy a share of many advantages....the individual possession of which can only be attained by a few'.²

Unwin explained that 'effective individual co-operation is limited to the comparatively small number who can have immediate personal knowledge of each other and can come into constant personal relation. Such a limited number of individuals form a group'.³ He went on to further explain that in order to support

a whole range of intimate neighbourly relations and co-operative activities, it would be better if this area is not too distant from each unit and is accessible without passing through the street,⁴ giving the opportunity of introducing them as central internal courtyard features⁵ (Fig.5, 6).

Fig.5 (below) Prototype of cottages grouped together around a co-operative centre: this crystallised Unwin's aspirational fostering of neighbourly co-operation into an outward spatial form, with inclusion of communal amenities preserved at block centres whilst retaining maximum road frontages for building purposes. Source: Town Planning in Practice in 1909 p.381

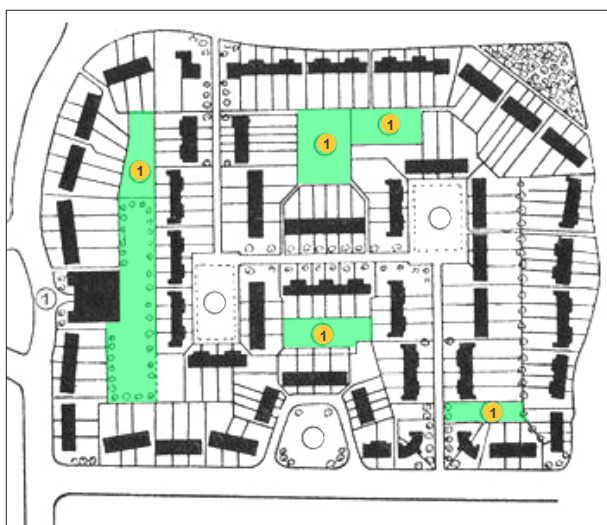
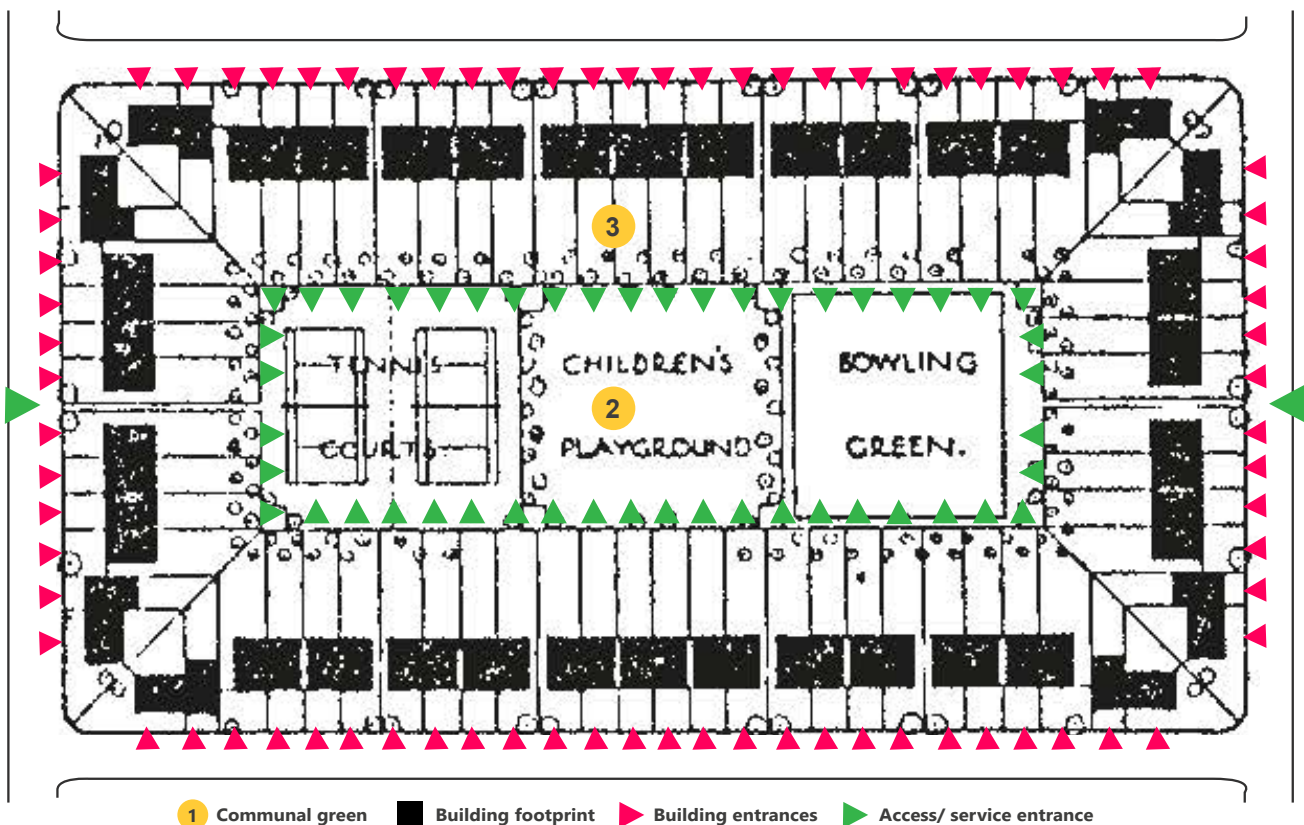


Fig.6 (left) Letchworth Garden City cottage estates, Pixmore 1907-9 and (right) the 'Artisans' Quarter, Hampstead Garden Suburb show how Unwin's spatial prototype can be moulded to various geometric forms and local conditions. Source: Town Planning in Practice, pg. 377

As a highly practical planner, Unwin carefully thought through the economic logic of this idea: a logic which remains equally valid to this day. Relatively small reductions in the sizes of individual gardens, he saw, could be combined to create sizeable communal spaces; so that 'green commons' could be created at block centres with no additional cost per plot⁶. Using the backland for these open spaces, Unwin also retained the maximum road frontage for financially-valuable building development⁷.

In addition to the green commons inside the perimeter blocks, the original garden city typology also provided a great deal of green space in the public realm. Though Unwin himself criticised his own original ideas - typically open-minded, he wrote in 1907 that the 'Spaces in the garden city tend to be too large in proportion to the buildings, and we have much yet to learn as to the best treatment'⁸ - these greens were originally well-used; but today's sense of stranger-danger means that most parents restrict their children to the private spaces of the home. Reducing the area of dedicated green space in the public realm allows us to alter the

balance between public and communal space established by the garden city pioneers; creating the potential for larger communal spaces within the perimeter blocks.

The purposes for these larger communal spaces are being reimagined in the context of today's particular social and ecological issues (Fig.7). Since they are safely disconnected from the wider settlement, for example, these spaces are suitable for active, relatively unsupervised play in outdoor green environments with health and socialisation potentials. These potentials are particularly valuable now that today's perceptions of stranger-danger mean that parents increasingly restrict their children to the private spaces of the home.

These larger, secure outdoor spaces also afford opportunities for urban food-production. These opportunities are valuable not only for nutrition, but also because participation in soil-to-soil agriculture offers a hands-on understanding of ecological processes: an invaluable foundation for creating ecologically-aware lifestyles, in the

process addressing the problems of high or very high risk of loneliness' which currently afflict older people in half of Letchworth's neighbourhoods⁹.

MOVING FORWARD

By this stage we have organised our natural infrastructure, streets and plots to achieve mutually beneficial relationships that provide cumulative support for the re-imagined Garden City's social foundation and ecological ceiling¹⁰. In our next article, we shall explain how we integrate land uses to take best advantage of the design potentials we built in so far.

References

1. Unwin, R. et al. *Town Planning in Practice*. Princeton Architectural Press. 1994.
- 2, 3. Unwin R., *Nothing Gained by overcrowding*, 1912 pamphlet, p.2. See: <https://www.hgstrust.org/documents/nothing-gained.pdf>
4. Unwin R., *Town Planning in Practice*, 1909, p.381
5. Unwin R., *Cottage Plans and Common Sense*, 1908, The Fabian Society, p.15 See: <https://www.hgstrust.org/documents/cottage-plans.pdf>
- 6, 7. *Nothing gained by overcrowding*: Sir Raymond Unwin; introduction by Dr. Mervyn Miller. 2014, Routledge, p.28
8. Unwin, R. 1907, *The Beauty of Towns*, reprinted in *Town and Country Planning*, Vol 22, Oct 1954, p528.
9. Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, *A View of Life in Letchworth Today*, 2017, p11
10. Raworth K., *Doughnut Economics*. 2017

Fig.7 Proposed plot structure generating perimeter blocks with communal gardens

