

# REIMAGINING THE 21ST CENTURY GARDEN CITY

Fig. 1: RIBA Reimagining the Garden City competition winning proposals by EcoResponsive Environments.

Crises arise when established ways of doing things are dying, but new ones cannot yet be born. This interregnum creates fertile ground for new ideas to emerge, and take root, with potential for global influence. One such idea that emerged in 1898 was Ebenezer Howard's Garden City.

This is the first of a series of short articles by EcoResponsive Environments, winners of the RIBA international competition Reimagining the Garden City (Fig. 1), that will explore ways of reimagining the Garden City movement to address the social, economic and environmental issues that face us today.



The purpose of this first article is to reimagine the potential of the movement's underlying approach to design.

### THE GARDEN CITY: SEEDS OF A COMPLEX-SYSTEMS APPROACH

The Garden City movement was originally developed to improve the dire living conditions faced by people attracted to towns in search of work, as nineteenth-century technology eroded opportunities for countryside agricultural employment<sup>1</sup>. At its heart, the movement has always sought basic social and economic fairness, through holistic design across multiple scales. Town Planning in Practice, the movement's flagship 'how to do it' book<sup>2</sup>, promotes a multi-layered approach to design; integrating landscapes, streets, plots and buildings together as complex systems and reinvesting, for community benefit, the increased land value that development generates.

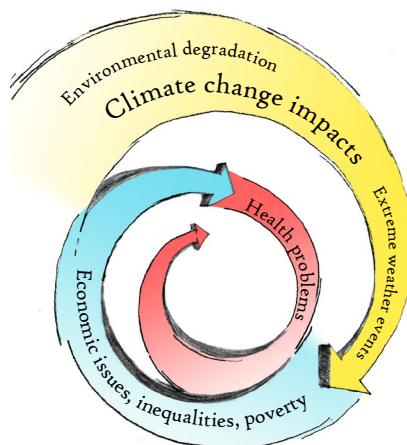
The movement's social values, holistic design and creative approach to commercial forces are as important today as ever they were, but they must now be

reimagined to face new issues (Fig. 2). Current ways of life are damaging natural capital's capacity to regulate climate; to provide food, clean air and water; and to offer cultural inspiration. Artificial intelligence is rapidly reducing the demand for all but highly-skilled workers, generating a precariat trapped in poverty and low job satisfaction; though the creative use of ICT has growing potential to support an alternative cooperative economy. Today's social systems are also problematic; with many people trapped between endemic loneliness and a pervasive sense of stranger-danger, with associated damage to physical and mental health now highlighted through coronavirus's impact.

### SUBSYSTEMS AT DIFFERENT SCALES AND RATES OF CHANGE

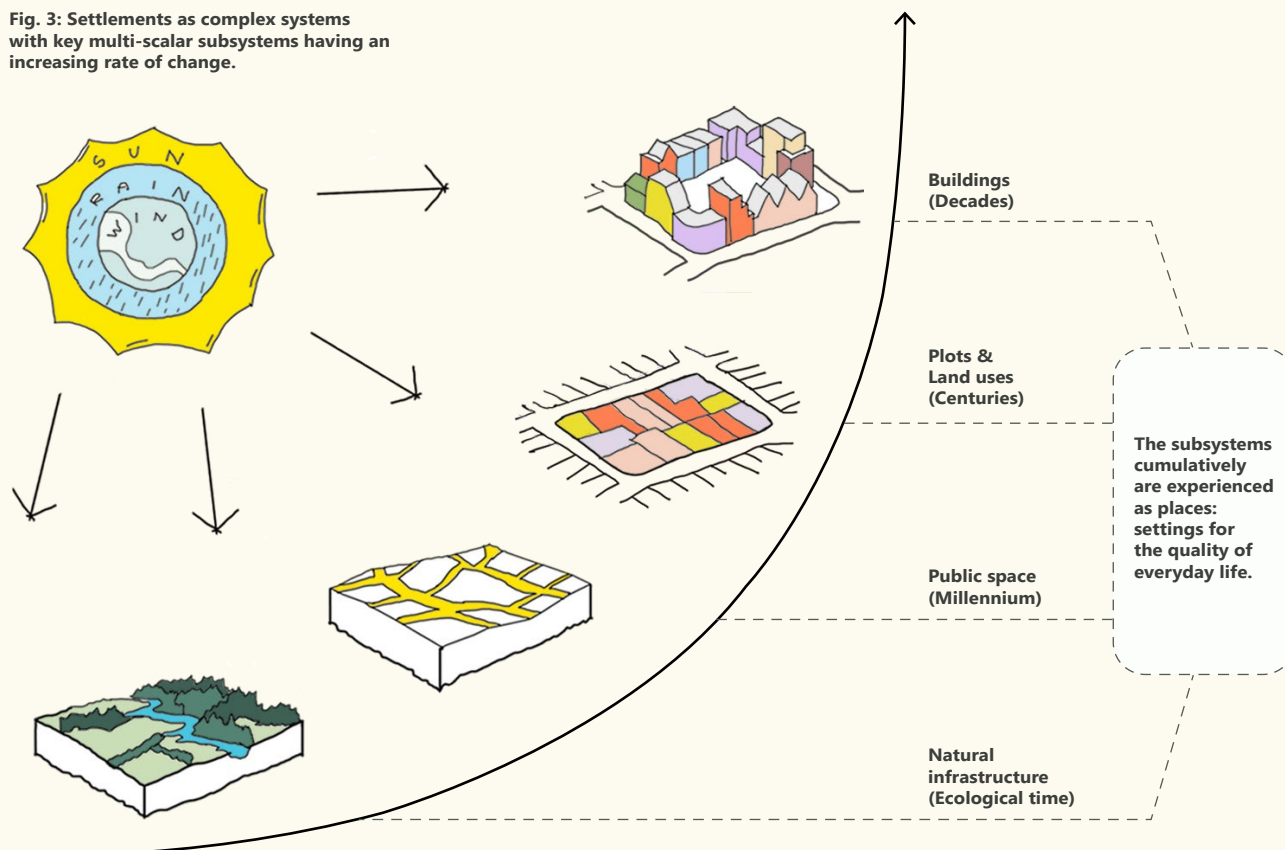
To address today's complex issues effectively, working towards everyday health and wellbeing with long-term ecological survival, we have to reimagine the original Garden City understanding of built environments as complex systems. Cities, as Town Planning in Practice taught, incorporate physical subsystems

Fig. 2: Complex issues of the 21st century



- landform, water system, green system, public linkage system, plots and buildings  
- at differing spatial scales. With twenty-first century hindsight, we now realise that these subsystems change through time at different rates (Fig. 3); which means that each has a certain degree of autonomy within the system as a whole.

Fig. 3: Settlements as complex systems with key multi-scalar subsystems having an increasing rate of change.



## THE TRAGEDY OF FRAGMENTATION

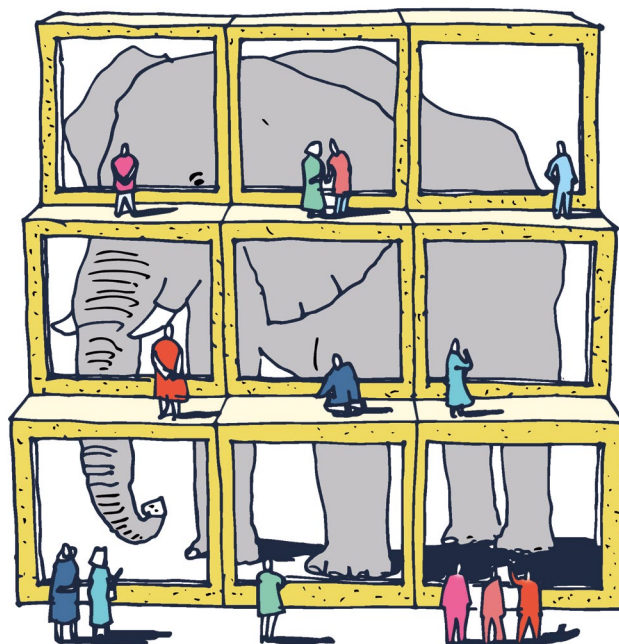
In the century since *Town Planning in Practice*, the relative autonomy of each subsystem has enabled different design professions, each seeking deeper understanding of the particular design issues of one particular subsystem, to evolve into separate silos. From within each silo, crises in the overall situation always look like someone else's problem. Well-intentioned but fragmented professions focus intently on their individual subsystems, but lose sight of their impact on the whole (Fig. 4).

## A HOLISTIC APPROACH FOR OUR TODAY AND TOMORROW

To overcome this fragmentation, to make the whole once again more than the sum of its parts - in ways that supports everyday health and well-being and our long-term collective survival on this planet - we need to restore the Garden City's holistic approach by reintegrating our design skills (Fig. 5).

The rest of this series will therefore use our RIBA competition-winning scheme, which expands the original Garden City of Letchworth with 900 new homes, as a case study to explore ways in which design practice can be reimagined to benefit from thinking across silos at all scales: from the design of natural infrastructure through to the details of building construction. The point is to encourage debate around this re-imagination agenda across all these scales, to reimagine the Garden City's holistic approach for our today and tomorrow.

Fig. 4: Professional myopia



### References

1. Howard, E. *To-morrow: a peaceful path to real reform*. London: Swan Sonnenschein; 1898.
2. Unwin, R. et al. *Town Planning in Practice*. Princeton Architectural Press. 1994.

Fig. 5: Making the whole more than the sum of its parts - specialists with wider vision.

