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EVEN SMITH WERGELAND

Norwegian Garden Cities

Yesterday, Today – and Tomorrow?

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YESTERDAY, TODAY - AND TOMORROW?

CAPPELEN DAMM AKADEMISK

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Introduction: The Past in the Present

The garden city movement had a tremendous impact on Norwegian architecture and planning in the first half of the 20th century, spawning a number of garden cities across the entire country, from the mountains to the lowlands, from the inland to the coast. Surprisingly little has been written about these settlements, with the exception of a few solitary studies.¹ One small book cannot possibly make reparation for this neglect. My aim is to create a basic overview of the different types of garden cities and discuss some of the topics that they encompass. But before I introduce the key themes, there is a need for a brief definition of the garden city.

The garden city is in some ways similar to other green settlements like garden villages, garden suburbs and garden resorts, most notably through a close focus on landscape cultivation and a strong element of utopianism. Green utopias typically aspire to improve life quality.² What separates the garden city formula from the others is the ambition of self-sufficient, autonomous cities.³ In reality, however, this rarely happened. Among the Norwegian examples in this book, only Rjukan can be called a self-sufficient town based on garden city principles. In fact, there were no precise distinctions between garden cities, garden suburbs and garden villages in Norwegian planning and architecture in the interwar period. They were simply called garden cities regardless of size, location

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- 1 Most of the existing reference material is focused on individual examples, particularly Ullevål Garden City [Ullevål Hageby], for example, Anne Fogt, Siri Meier and Anne Ullmann, *Ullevål Hageby Gjennom 90 år – Fra Bolignød til Kardemomme By* (Oslo: Unipax, 2007), and Elisabeth Synnøve Roaas, “Ullevål Hageby – Verdienes Landskap” (Master’s thesis, University of Oslo, 2016).
 - 2 Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs, “Nature, Utopia and the Garden,” in *Earth Perfect. Nature, Utopia and the Garden*, eds. Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012), 7.
 - 3 Robert A.M. Stern, David Fishman and Jacob Tilove, *Paradise Planned. The Garden Suburb and the Modern City* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2013), 203.

and design.⁴ Most of the Norwegian garden cities did, however, have a local center with shops and other services. They were rarely monofunctional at the time of their original conception. This sets them apart from straight housing projects.

At a more detailed level, the decisive ingredients are public health, social life, industrial and agricultural productivity, and specific ownership models. Dugald MacFadyen has described it thus: “A Garden City is a town designed for healthy living and industry, of a size which makes possible a full social life, but not larger: surrounded by a rural belt: the whole of the land being in public ownership or held in trust for the community.”⁵ The community aspect is essential, as is the issue of class. The majority of Norwegian garden cities were planned for the working classes. This ideal came from the movement’s founding father, Ebenezer Howard, as well as a social movement in Norway called *Egne Hjem* [A home of one’s own], which in many ways was the start of social housing as a modern phenomenon in Norway.⁶ The concern for common people’s everyday life and the societal responsibility to help those in need were pivotal.

A major downside, however, is that garden cities often excluded their intended residents in economic terms. As reports of the period and recent research suggest, those who needed them the most, the unskilled labor force at the bottom of the working-class segment, only gained limited access to Norwegian garden cities. Even examples like Lille Tøyen Garden City, where many of the residents were workers, did not house the poorest. As time has gone by and garden cities on the fringes of bigger cities have been engulfed by urban development, they have become enormously attractive. As a housing advertisement from February 2021 illustrates, such garden city neighborhoods have now

4 Morten Bing and Espen Johnsen, “Innledning: Nye Hjem i Mellomkrigstiden,” in *Nye Hjem. Bomiljøer i Mellomkrigstiden*, eds. Morten Bing and Espen Johnsen (Oslo: Norsk Folkemuseums Årbok, 1998), 20.

5 Dugald MacFadyen, *Sir Ebenezer Howard and the Town Planning Movement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), 109.

6 This thesis is a solid study of *Egne Hjem*: Mona Nielsen, “‘Med Hjem Skal Landet Bygges.’ Egne Hjem og Hagebybevegelsen i Norge. Utdrag fra Boligsakens Historie” (master’s thesis, University of Bergen, 1984).

been taken over by an increasingly wealthy segment of the population.⁷ To have a “beautiful townhouse with a large garden”, as the advertisement promises, has become a luxury that relatively few can afford. This was not the case 30 years ago.⁸ Whether this means that the garden city movement failed from the start in social terms or went astray later is one of the questions I will be discussing along the way. Or perhaps we are still waiting for the perfect delivery of Ebenezer Howard’s vision?

Another key theme is the town–country relation imbedded in the concept of garden cities, as proposed by Howard in *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Social Reform* (1898) and the revised edition *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (1902).⁹ The town–country duality is both a bond and an opposition, depending on how the garden city is defined and conceived, and the context in which it occurs. Its adoption into Norwegian practice will therefore be discussed in light of previous studies of the garden city heritage,¹⁰ comparing the international principles with the application across Norway. Since the competition between urban and rural areas in Norway is a huge topic, I shall limit myself to the impact of garden cities on the edges of existing cities, where urban and rural environments clashed in the 1920s and ’30s. It is, by definition, impossible to live in a big city and outside it at the same time, but the garden city formula seems to insist that the ultimate compromise is achievable. Does it glue the urban and the rural together or increase the tension between them?

In recent decades, the garden city has been criticized for its decentralizing, suburbanizing effect in large cities. The compact city has

7 “Lille Tøyen Hageby”, finn.no, February 28, 2021, <https://www.bolig.ai/no/adresse/ansgar-sørliens-vei-55-oslo-285667294/1929799>.

8 The working-class character was still present then, according to this account: Ingar Arneberg, *Lille Tøyen – Arbeidernes Hageby* (Oslo: Self-published, 1990).

9 Ebenezer Howard, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Social Reform* (London: Routledge, 2003), and Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1902).

10 Stephen V. Ward, ed., *Garden City: Past, Present, and Future* (London: Spon, 1992); Stanley Buder, *Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Walter L. Creese. *The Search for the Environment: The Garden City – Before and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

been perceived as an antidote.¹¹ For proponents of the compact city, the garden city is a symbol of outdated ideals: a pastoral indulgence that ought to be abolished. Other scholars challenge that verdict by identifying the deficiencies of the compact city. Michael Neuman calls attention to the “compact city paradox,” which he describes like this: “For a city to be sustainable, the argument goes, functions and population must be concentrated at higher densities. For a city to be livable, functions and population must be dispersed at lower densities.”¹² This could be rephrased as “the garden city paradox” in light of how popular such neighborhoods are. Yesterday’s urban suburbia has become a gold standard that may or may not be good for the city of today, depending on the viewpoint. In Norway, this gold standard is strongly connected to a fundamental affinity for timber architecture, preferably a single-family house, as I will reveal in the section that deals with the domestication of English garden city architecture.

Another issue of great urgency is the ongoing discussion on urban gardens, those pockets of rural agriculture in the city. Up until recently, the main emphasis has been on urban trends, like roof-top gardening and the general quest of creating more green spaces within densely populated districts.¹³ Now the radar is honing in on everyday gardens as ecological resources in their own right. Books like *Garden and Climate*, *Designing the Sustainable Site* and *Garden Revolution*,¹⁴ building on classics like *Nature in Cities*,¹⁵ are examples of this development, which is an important framework in the section of this book that deals

11 Michael Neuman, “The Compact City Fallacy,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 24, no. 1 (September 2005): 12.

12 Neuman, 16.

13 This book is a good example: Anna Yudina, *Garden City: Supergreen Buildings, Urban Skyscrapers and the New Planted Space* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017).

14 Chip Sullivan, *Garden and Climate* (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 2003); Heather L. Venhaus, *Designing the Sustainable Site: Integrated Design Strategies for Small Scale Sites and Residential Landscapes* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2012); and Larry Weaner, *Garden Revolution: How Our Landscapes Can Be a Source of Environmental Change* (Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 2016).

15 Ian C. Laurie, ed. *Nature in Cities: The Natural Environment in the Design and Development of Urban Green Space* (Chichester, New York, Brisbane and Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1979).

with the garden city's green legacy. To some, the garden is a savior in both environmental and social terms: a generator of biodiversity and green welfare.¹⁶ To others, it is an unnecessary luxury that should be utilized for more buildings.

The politics and ethics of these debates link back to Howard's reflections on societal standards. His primary concerns were welfare, health, prosperity and education for all—ideals which are impossible to refute. Howard was no stranger to problems and conflicts within his own ideal concept. In a chapter of *Garden Cities of To-morrow* called "Some difficulties considered", he offers the following advice to anyone who wants to test a town-planning model in reality:

Long-continued effort, in spite of failure and defeat, is the fore-runner of complete success. He who wishes to achieve success may turn past defeat into future victory by observing one condition. He must profit by past experiences, and aim at retaining all the strong points without the weaknesses of former efforts.¹⁷

This sounds simple enough but obviously it is not. I take it as an encouragement to evaluate the efforts of yesterday in accordance with current issues and future needs. Urban planning now stands at the threshold of an era based on circular principles, which will make it significantly harder to replace existing buildings and neighborhood structures with new ones. Caring for what is already there is the essence of circular thinking.¹⁸ Howard ends *Garden Cities of To-morrow* with a discussion on the future of London.¹⁹ I shall do the same here with the future of Oslo, in light of the problems and opportunities that the garden city legacy represents, with the emergence of circular thinking in mind.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Hou, *Greening Cities, Growing Communities: Learning from Seattle's Urban Community Gardens* (Seattle: Landscape Architecture Foundation University of Washington Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, 95.

¹⁸ Peter Lacy, Jessica Long and Wesley Spindler, *The Circular Economy Handbook* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

¹⁹ Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, 141–152.



Figure 1. Sinsen Garden City in June 2022. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.
© Even Smith Wergeland.



Figure 2. A new residential area at Løren in June 2022. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.
© Even Smith Wergeland.

The book has three chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the origins of the garden city movement, its arrival and development in Norway. Chapter 2 is a detailed study of Sinsen Garden City in Oslo (Fig. 1). Many of the contemporary debates about the garden city as a form of urban living can be linked to this historical example and a new neighborhood nearby,

Løren (Fig. 2), which is often referred to in debates about densification in Oslo. This comparison relates to Kostas Mouratidis' research on livability, which has uncovered a notable lack of direct comparisons between compact cities and various degrees of sprawl.²⁰ Chapter 3 deals with the current status and future relevance of garden cities, paying particular attention to terms like livability and garden ecology.

A note of caution must be issued. I currently reside in Sinsen Garden City with my partner and our two children. My understanding of what a garden city is today and has been historically is obviously shaped by this fact. It has not been my aim, however, to write about the garden city from an activist's point of view or to "promote the garden suburb as a development model for the present and foreseeable future,"²¹ as the authors of *Paradise Planned* openly admit in their introduction. I have tried to use my own experience as part of the critical discourse, which builds on a number of scholarly studies with different perspectives on the questions at stake. I am inspired in this endeavor by Nigel A. Raab's *The Crisis from Within*,²² where he addresses the fundamental problems of methodological precision and consistency which have always haunted the humanities in general and the history disciplines in particular. All historical subfields are characterized by interpretive confusion, he argues, and that has not been mended by data-obsessive objectivism or speculative subjectivism. As historians, we are forced to maneuver as best we can at the crossroads of subjective imagination and objective invention. Either way, we ought to be as accurate as possible within the chosen framework and always remain open for criticism. This book rests on this ideal.

20 Kostas Mouratidis, "Is Compact City Livable? The Impact of Compact Versus Sprawled Neighbourhoods on Neighbourhood Satisfaction," *Urban Studies* 55, no. 11 (2018): 2409.

21 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, *Paradise Planned*, 15.

22 Nigel A. Raab, *The Crisis from Within: Historians, Theory, and the Humanities* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2015).

CHAPTER 1

The Garden City Movement in Norway

Ebenezer Howard is widely acclaimed as the inventor of the garden city. His vision of a decentralized utopia was not entirely of his own making, however. “In general terms”, writes Stephen V. Ward, “none of the individual elements that made up Howard’s ideas were particularly new.”²³ Howard’s garden city was a synthesis of elements from all sorts of utopian currents in the 19th century.²⁴ He was an excellent compiler of trends and observer of problems through systematic studies of the 19th century city and its societal conditions. This approach enabled him to capture exciting ideas and blend them with a pragmatic take on social reform.

There was a *tension* in Howard’s utopian vision. He set out to challenge conventional values, but also to consolidate and reinforce them.²⁵ This meant that the garden city could appeal to both ends of the political spectrum in England at the time, the radicals and the conservatives. Furthermore, he was a gifted writer, an ability that led to something as unexpected as a best-selling book on town planning, which was republished numerous times and translated into several other languages. The formation of the Garden City Association in 1899 quickly spread the word in England and elsewhere and, subsequently, turned theory into practice.²⁶ Through these steps—the studies, the writings and the organizational framework—he instigated a particular form of planning that would make a distinct mark on the Western World: decentralized planning.²⁷

23 Stephen V. Ward, “The Garden City Introduced,” in *Garden City: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Stephen V. Ward (London: Spon, 1992), 2.

24 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, *Paradise Planned*, 208–209.

25 Buder, *Visionaries and Planners*, viii.

26 See Buder, 116–132.

27 Buder, 73.

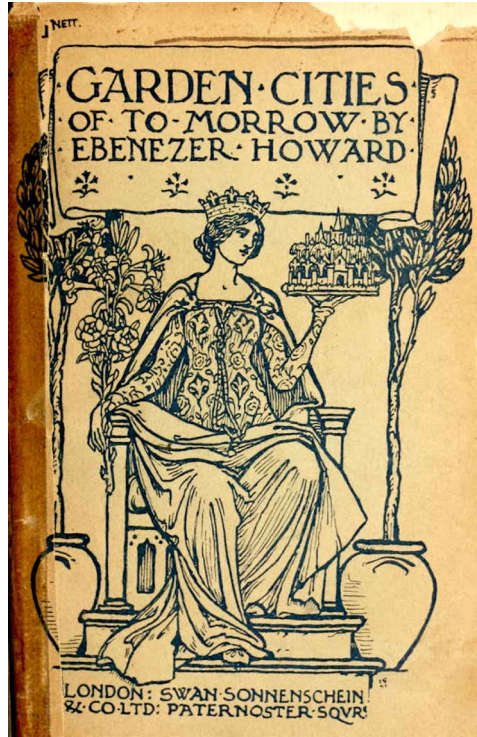


Figure 3. The book cover of *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* as it looked when it was published in 1902 by Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Photo: Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46134/46134-h/46134-h.htm>

The essence of this planning approach is Howard’s conceptualization of a *town–country magnet*: a third form of settlement which is not a city, nor the countryside, but a collection of the advantages of both and a rejection of the disadvantages (Fig. 4). *Paradise planned*, in other words. The smog-filled, dirty and narrow streets of London were the backdrop as Howard tried to envision a better life for the poor and underprivileged.²⁸ He was deeply concerned by “the rent problem”—that increases in working-class salaries were often surpassed by increases in rents in the bigger cities.²⁹ Howard pointed out that there were no adequate tools to manage the situation after decades of explosive population growth, which had led to an

28 Frederick H.A. Aalen, “English Origins,” in *Garden City: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Stephen V. Ward (London: Spon, 1992), 28–29.

29 Buder, *Visionaries and Planners*, 17.

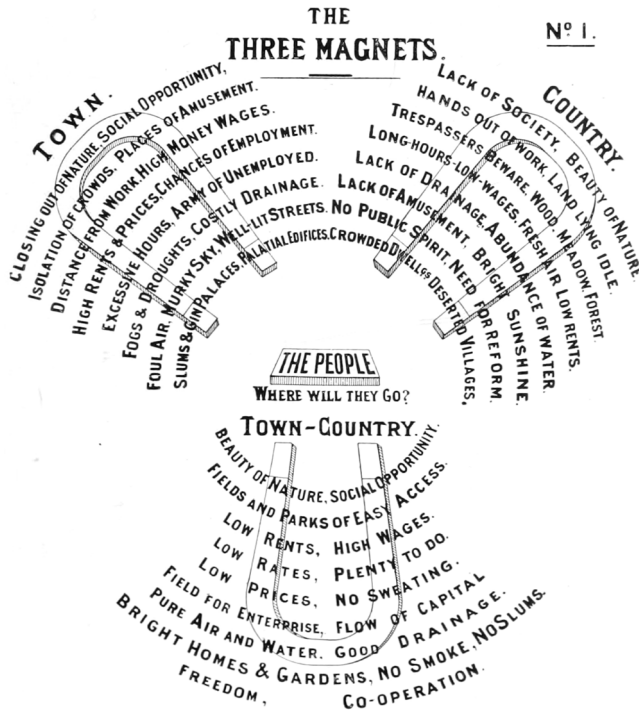


Figure 4. The Three Magnets (town, country and town-country) as visualized by Howard in *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, 1902. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Howard-three-magnets.png>

unhealthy aggregation of people in the city and a drainage of resources from the countryside.³⁰ Howard saw the town–country magnet as a stepping stone towards a land policy that could reconcile town and country again. The garden city was to become a place where people could work and reside in sound environments.

Howard’s amalgamation of green beauty and public health is probably the most well-known element of the garden city scheme. But the majority of *Garden Cities of To-morrow* is devoted to “dry” issues like administration, organization, operations and finances—the ingredients that make the garden city tick. A noteworthy ingredient is “pro-municipal operation”—new forms of cooperation between the public sector and

30 Howard, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Social Reform*, 20–22.

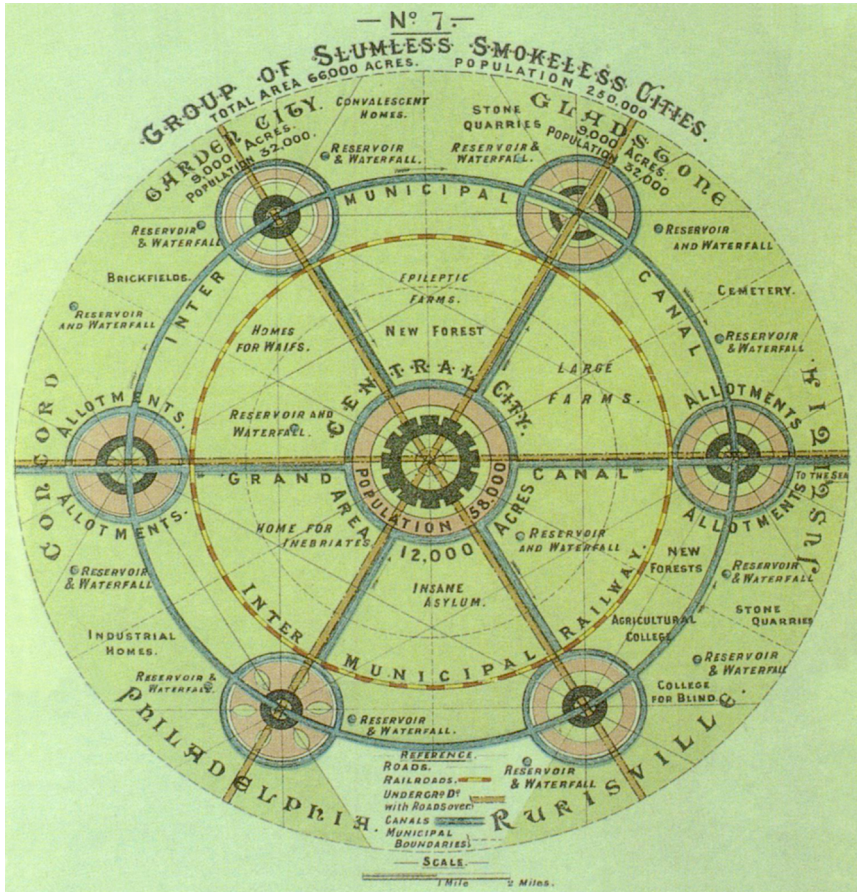


Figure 5. Plate no. 7 from *Garden Cities of To-morrow*: Howard's diagram of an ideal city structure with a population of 250,000. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Diagram_No.7_\(Howard,_Ebenezer,_To-morrow\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Diagram_No.7_(Howard,_Ebenezer,_To-morrow).jpg)

private investors, philanthropic and charitable institutions.³¹ The practical aspects of the book are much more detailed than the planning and landscape aspects.³² With the exception of the most developed illustrations, like the overview on how to organize a garden city region of about 250,000 inhabitants (Fig. 5), much was left for planners and architects to solve.

³¹ Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, 96–111.

³² This observation is also made here: Aalen, “English Origins,” 30–31.

The Garden City in Practice

If the timing had been right for the book, it was perhaps even better for the intended practical impact. At the beginning of the 20th century, cities across Europe were moving into the metropolitan phase. The enormous population growth continued at an even greater pace than before. Miles Glendinning has called it “The Age of Emergencies”.³³ Working-class areas became slum areas, too many people were crammed together in tiny flats and neighborhoods with dense physical structures, and there were fundamental problems with water supplies, sewerage systems and so on. Urgent action was needed, and this eased the transition of Howard’s principles from social reform to physical reform.

New forms of state-funded mass housing were one way of dealing with the dire situation. In Oslo, or Kristiania as the city was then called, the municipality started to take an active role in the planning and construction of housing. From 1911, the municipality ran its own projects through an office for housing. In 1918, the architect Harald Hals became the director of this office, which immediately proceeded to design and build a number of residential areas around the city. During the time span from 1911 to 1931, the municipality gradually became the biggest owner of residential buildings in Oslo.³⁴ Another influential organization was the Norwegian Association of Housing Reform [*Norsk Forening for Boligreform*]. Formed in 1913, the association quickly established a close relation to the international garden city movement.³⁵

In Britain, the garden city movement was institutionalized, first as the Garden City Association in 1899, then as the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association, which secured the formation of the Royal Town Planning Institute in 1914. The movement exerted its influence through a number of channels and media, including specially produced films that were distributed to countries like Norway, where the film “English

33 Miles Glendinning, *Mass Housing. Modern Architecture and State Power – A Global History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 31–78.

34 For further details, see Oslo Kommunale Boligråd, *Boligarbeidet Gjennem Tyve År. En Beretning om Oslo Kommunale Boligråds Virksomhet og Kommunens Arbeide med Boligsaken 1911–1931. Med en Oversikt over Beboelses- og Befolkningsforhold 1814–1914* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1931).

35 Nielsen, “Med Hjem Skal Landet Bygges.”

Garden Cities” [*Engelske Havebyer*] was shown around the entire country between 1919 and 1921.³⁶ This featured a lecture by the English politician Richard Reiss, director of the Hampstead Garden Suburb and a leading figure within the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association. The lecture had been translated into Norwegian by the planner and social economist Christian Gierløff, who also lectured in the film. Gierløff was an influential force in Norwegian planning at the time, as editor of the journal *Housing in the City and the Countryside* [*Boligsak i by og bygd*]³⁷ and general secretary of the Norwegian Association for Housing Reform.³⁸ The association’s secretary, Willy Norvej, toured extensively with the movie to introduce it to the local audience ahead of each screening. These film and lecture events were normally covered by the newspapers and linked to local and regional housing debates.³⁹ This form of professional exchange and promotional work across nations, with Britain at the center of attention, was crucial in terms of spreading the garden city idea outside its place of origin.

Three people were of particular importance in terms of inventing a garden city practice in Britain: the Scottish planner Patrick Geddes, who wrote the influential book *Cities in Evolution* (1915),⁴⁰ and the English architects Raymond Unwin and Richard Barry Parker. The partnership of Unwin and Parker formed a bridge between the Arts and Crafts movement of the 19th century and the garden city movement of the 20th century, through their desire to introduce handcrafts and durable materials into mass housing.⁴¹ In Creese’s words, “William Morris and Ebenezer

36 The film ended its long journey in the counties of Finnmark and Nordland: See “Filmen fra de engelske havebyer”, *Folkets Frihet*, December 18, 1920, 2, and “Engelske havebyer”, *Nordlandsposten*, February 11, 1921, 3.

37 Michael Hopstock, “Holtet Hageby – En Rød Bydel?” in *Nye hjem. Bomiljøer i Mellomkrigstiden*, eds. Morten Bing and Espen Johnsen (Oslo: Norsk Folkemuseums Arbok, 1998), 130.

38 Helga Stave Tvinneim, “Internasjonale Byplankongressar og Norsk Byplanlegging 1920–1940,” in *Til og fra Norden. Tyve Artikler om Nordisk Billedkunst og Arkitektur*, eds. Marianne Marcussen and Gertrud With (Copenhagen: Department of Arts and Social Studies, University of Copenhagen, 1999), 232.

39 Here are two examples: “Engelske havebyer”, *Finmarken*, December 29, 1920, 2, and “Lillestrøm – Engelske Havebyer paa film”, *Romerike*, March 30, 1920, 2.

40 Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1915).

41 See Richard Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, *The Art of Building a Home* (Manchester: Chorlton & Knowles, Mayfield Press).

Howard had the dreams—Parker and Unwin in the next generation helped them come true.⁴² Unwin and Parker soon got involved in several projects, including the creation of Letchworth, the first settlement in England based entirely on the garden city scheme. The end result has been described as a disappointing compromise for the architects, largely due to the fact that the principle of communal land ownership was difficult to implement.⁴³ Letchworth was, nevertheless, a major achievement that all the following garden city projects could benefit from.⁴⁴ “Letchworth legitimized a Garden City movement no longer dismissed as utopian”,⁴⁵ as Buder puts it. Many of the lessons from Letchworth appear in Unwin’s book *Town Planning in Practice: An Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs* (1909), which stands as the ultimate adoption of Howard’s ideas into practice.⁴⁶

Another important achievement for Unwin was Hampstead Garden Suburb. Even if it was suburban, it was planned with a center that gave it an urban character. Unlike Letchworth, which had its fair share of critics both within and beyond the Garden City Association, Hampstead Garden Suburb was applauded by contemporary experts like the American historian Lewis Mumford and the English architect Frederick Gibberd.⁴⁷ It served as a source of inspiration for Sverre Pedersen,⁴⁸ who was a propagator of garden city principles in Norway, which means that it had a direct influence on Norwegian practice. This may explain why a center, or at least a service hub of some kind, has been a trademark of many Norwegian garden cities. At Ullevål Garden City in Oslo, the main square of Damplassen served as a business center with several shops, a bank, a post office, a police station and a telecommunication building.⁴⁹

42 Creese, *The Search for the Environment: The Garden City – Before and After*, 158.

43 Ward, “The Garden City Introduced,” 4.

44 The Letchworth scheme was troubled by economic miscalculations, disagreements on land use, rapid changes in the building industry, and World War I. See Creese, *The Search for the Environment: The Garden City – Before and After*, 203–218.

45 Buder, *Visionaries and Planners*, 95.

46 Raymond Unwin, *Town Planning in Practice: An Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1909).

47 Creese, *The Search for the Environment: The Garden City – Before and After*, 219.

48 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, *Paradise Planned*, 560.

49 “Et forretningssentrum,” in Einar Li, *Oslo Havebyselskap Gjennom 30 År* (Oslo: Kirstes Boktrykkeri, 1942), 34.

Clearly, this was more than a monofunctional residential area—it had the features of a tiny city.

The 1910s brought critical acclaim for Howard and further progress for the garden city movement in the form of Welwyn Garden City. This time the movement assumed more direct control of the scheme. They hired the Canadian-born architect Louis de Soissons as master planner and inspected every step of the process carefully, especially the economic expenses. In 1920, the first residents moved in and the scheme gradually unfolded during the 1920s. It was not fully complete when Howard passed away in 1928, but at least he had gained an impression of what Welwyn became in the end: a highly perfected version of the garden city in planning terms, a slightly disappointing affair in social terms. The difficulty of achieving lower-cost housing turned the working class into a minority in Welwyn. Similar problems would occur in Norway as the concept began to gain a foothold there.

The Garden City Arrives in Norway

Stern, Fishman and Tilove suggest that “Garden city planning took hold in Norway just before the outbreak of World War I, when the need to improve working-class housing became an issue of national importance.”⁵⁰ This is fairly accurate from a planning point of view but as a housing trend it kicked off around 1900, with the formation of the *Egne Hjem* [A home of one’s own] movement.⁵¹ *Egne Hjem* ran a magazine and a construction company, which carried out a series of building projects in Bærum, west of Oslo, between 1900 and 1910.⁵² The *Egne Hjem* magazine was one of the first Norwegian media that explicitly addressed the garden city movement, in 1904, and other media soon picked up the trail.

It did not take long until the garden city label was used for the first time in a Norwegian architectural project. In 1907, the mayor of Kristiania,

50 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, *Paradise Planned*, 558.

51 For a thorough account of this movement, see Øystein Bergkvam, “Egne Hjem-bevegelsen i Norge 1900–1920: Tradisjon eller Nye Strømninger?” (master’s thesis, University of Oslo, 1999).

52 Ole H. Tokerud, *Typografenes Byggeselskap (Egne Hjem) Gjennem 25 År* (Oslo: Arbeidernes Aktietrykkeri, 1925).

Sofus Arctander, announced an architectural competition to erect a series of affordable houses at the foot of the Ekeberg hill. The competition was won by the architects Christian Morgenstjerne and Anders Eide, and the project was built between 1910 and 1911, named after the mayor who initiated it.⁵³ The Arctander Garden City (Fig. 6) is directly tied to the *Egne Hjem* movement, which lobbied to get it constructed.⁵⁴ Morgenstjerne and Eide's winning entry, titled "*Egne Hjem*", soon formed the basis of a similar garden city project elsewhere in the town, Hasle Garden City, financed by the chocolate company Freia and built in 1914.⁵⁵



Figure 6. A photo of the Arctander Garden City, Oslo, date unknown. Photo: O. Væring, archives of the Norsk Teknisk Museum.

53 For a comprehensive historical account, see Jan Erik Heier, Sidsel Wester and Per Olav Reinton, *Arctanderbyen 1911–2011* (Oslo: Ekeberg Egnehjem Velforening, 2011).

54 Lars Emil Hansen, "Kampen mot Bolignøden," *Fremtid for Fortiden*, no. 3 (2015): 26.

55 Knut Langeland, "Hage for Hvermann," *Fremtid for Fortiden*, no. 3 (2015): 55.



Figure 7. Lille Tøyen Garden City in June 2022. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.
© Even Smith Wergeland.

Generation I: England in Norway

The early Norwegian garden cities were mostly modeled on the English template: vertically divided, semi-detached houses with plastered brick walls, front and back gardens, dispersed at low densities. The inspiration came from vernacular cottage and village architecture, Arts and Crafts ideals and Revivalist architectural styles like Neo-Georgian and Neo-Tudor. The roof shapes could vary a lot, from intricate mansard shapes to plain gable solutions, and each project would normally have an element of individuality – a deviance from the norm.⁵⁶ The layout could be described as informal and systematic at the same time. Unlike strictly classical layouts, the English garden cities were not symmetrical and did not have fixed axes. But the houses were nevertheless grouped and located according to recognizable patterns, for instance, a mixture of open lamellas and semi-closed quarters. There would sometimes be radial areas too, resembling Howard’s circular master layout. The ideal was to carefully relate the layout to the local topography—another departure from the classical

56 Mervyn Miller, *English Garden Cities: An Introduction* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2010), 37–57.



Figure 8. Ullevål Garden City in 1926. Photo: photographer unknown/Oslo Museum. Reproduced with the permission of the Oslo Museum; this image cannot be reused without permission.

planning tradition.⁵⁷ In summary, the template was both recognizable and flexible.

In *Paradise Planned*, Ullevål Garden City (Fig. 8) is listed as the most prominent example of the English model in Norway, alongside Lindern Garden City (1919) by Harald Hals and Adolf Jensen and Ekeberg Garden City (1924) by Oscar Hoff.⁵⁸ Stern, Fishman and Tilove refer to Ullevål as “Norway’s most significant garden village – and a worthy example of the type by international standards.”⁵⁹ The English model continued to spread across the country and remains to this day the dominant image of what a Norwegian garden city looks like.

A hugely influential figure in regard to the implementation of garden city thinking in Norway is the aforementioned Sverre Pedersen, who worked in almost every region of the country. Pedersen took garden

⁵⁷ Miller, 17–36.

⁵⁸ Stern, Fishman and Tilove, *Paradise Planned*, 558–560.

⁵⁹ Stern, Fishman and Tilove, 558.

city planning to a large-scale level, in accordance with Howard's vision. He also had a huge impact on the planning profession, after he became Norway's first professor of planning in 1920.⁶⁰ His diverse approach demonstrated that garden city principles could appear in many guises; they could be rearranged in light of local characteristics.⁶¹ There was clearly an element of variation and adaptive thinking within Norwegian garden city practice right from the beginning.⁶² The examples that followed in Oslo after the Arctander Garden City were not mere copies. Lille Tøyen Garden City (Fig. 7), designed by the architect Magnus Poulsson, had a rectangular plan and two-and-a-half or three-and-a-half story houses.

During the 1910s and '20s, as garden city settlements started to appear around the country, the idea of a rural town was redefined. Settlements like Rjukan fit into a category that Stern, Fishman and Tilove call "industrial garden villages."⁶³ Rjukan (Fig. 9) is one of relatively few examples in Norway of the garden city formula being used to design an entire town from scratch: a "company town" funded and financed by the Norwegian power company Hydro. Sam Eyde, the company director,⁶⁴ enlisted a host of prominent architects for the task, including Thorvald Astrup, Harald Aars, Ove Bang and Magnus Poulsson, who in turn won a competition for the second phase in 1912 when there was need for further residential expansion. The scheme was completed around 1920.

Another industrial garden village is Tveitahaugen Garden City (1916–18) in Tyssedal (Fig. 10), planned by the aforementioned Morgenstjerne and Eide, and designed by Oscar Hoff. This was English brick architecture with a baroque twist, built by French craftsmen and nicely adjusted to the local hilly landscape. Unlike Rjukan, this was merely a residential village situated inside a larger settlement.

60 This book provides a good overview of Pedersen's importance in Norwegian planning: Helga Stave Tvinnereim, *Sverre Pedersen – En Pioner i Norsk Byplanlegging* (Oslo: Kolofon Forlag, 2015).

61 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, *Paradise Planned*, 560–565.

62 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, 558–565.

63 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, 785.

64 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, 785.



Figure 9a. Rjukan, a company-town based on garden city principles, in October 1925. Photo: Anders Beer Wilse, archives of the Norsk Folkemuseum.



Figure 9b. Aerial photo of Rjukan, taken from the roof of the Sæheim Hydroelectric Power Station in June 2022. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland. © Even Smith Wergeland.



Figure 10. Tveitahaugen Garden City, Tyssedal. Aerial photo from 2006. Photo: Harald Hognerud. © Kraftmuseet. Reproduced with the permission of Kraftmuseet; this image cannot be reused without permission.

Høyanger in the Sogn region is another noteworthy example of an industry-driven “company town” with a garden-city flavor. Based on a plan from 1917 by Morgenstjerne and Eide, the model was English, with architectural contributions from various Norwegian architects, including Arnstein Arneberg, who designed the church, and Nicolai Beer.⁶⁵ Høyanger’s rise from a tiny village to a small-town garden city took place on the basis of close cooperation between leading architects and leading industrialists.⁶⁶ A third example of this kind is the so-called “American” garden city in the industrial town of Sauda, Åbøbyen (1916–40), which was established by the American company Electric Furnace Products.⁶⁷

The English impulses also spread to cities other than Oslo. In Stavanger, the newly appointed city architect Johannes Thorvald Westbye devised a number of garden city-oriented schemes between 1916 and 1920. The biggest plan was Egenes Garden City (Fig. 11), which only resulted in three

65 For more input on the Norwegian mountainside industrial utopias, see Eva Røyran, “Ein Norsk Idealby,” *Bergens Tidende*, June 29, 2012, 2–5.

66 Nielsen, “Med Hjem Skal Landet Bygges,” 150–184.

67 Roar Lund, ed., *Åbøbyen – Hagebyen Under Røyken* (Sauda: Sauda Sogelag, 2020), 10–17.

houses but nevertheless set a new housing standard.⁶⁸ In Trondheim, Sverre Pedersen drew up plans for Lillegården Garden City (1916–1922), which was a combination of fairly large tenement buildings in brick and smaller houses in timber. The enterprise was one of the biggest that the municipality had ever carried out.⁶⁹

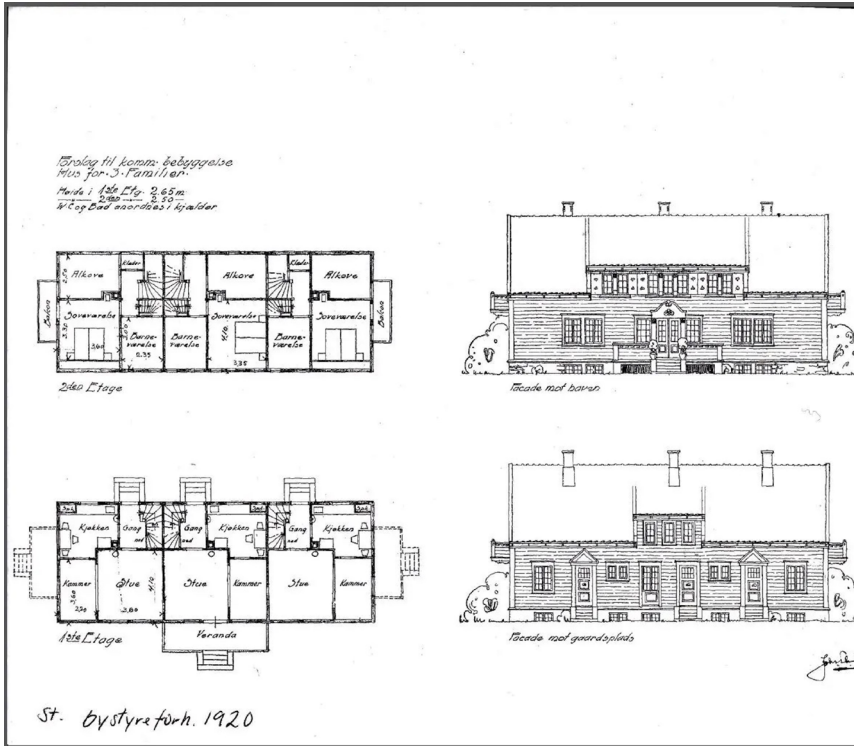


Figure 11. Drawings for Egenes Garden City in Stavanger, 1920. Photo: Stavanger byarkiv.

In the southeastern town of Sarpsborg, the financial muscle of the local industrial giant Borregaard led to the realization of Opsund Garden City (1920–1940), also known as Bytangen Garden City. Oscar Hoff was the architect, and he also carried out a similar project for Borregaard at

68 Rolf Gunnar Torgersen, “Boligpolitikk i Stavanger 1916–1920,” *Stavangeren*, no. 1 (2017): 64–83.

69 Roy Åge Håpnes, *Trondheim Tar Form. Bygningshistoriske Blikk på Bydelene* (Trondheim: Eiendomsmegler 1, 2003), 168.

Grotterødløkka in Sarpsborg.⁷⁰ In the neighboring town of Fredrikstad, garden city plans were made as early as 1904 for an area called Kongsten. Some brick houses were erected, in accordance with a competition entry in 1916 by the architect Jacob Holmgren but, due to various unfortunate circumstances, including two world wars, the majority of the scheme was put on hold until the postwar period. By then, the building approach had changed from brick to timber and the overall arrangements were carried out by Sverre Pedersen in collaboration with Tor Narve Ludvigsen.⁷¹

The garden city influence from England was pretty persistent during the first decades of the 20th century, both as a social vision aimed at welfare for workers, a housing typology for affordable living, and an architectural style associated with specific esthetic qualities. In the midst of this was a widespread belief in green qualities, epitomized by the vision of gardens for all. The model seemed fairly adoptable. The early garden cities were not without their critics, however. The residents of the Arctander Garden City complained about technical faults like cracking wooden panels, the accumulation of smoke in the chimney and rainwater in the basement during the inaugural phase.⁷² Some complaints were aimed at the architectural program. As one resident of Ullevål Garden City put it: “With regards to the architecture, the medal clearly has a flipside. It seems like the architect in charge has focused more, if not to say exclusively, on the exterior appearance – on the visual impact in the environment as a whole – than practical arrangements inside.”⁷³ During the early phase, there were problems with water supplies, electricity and the interior design, which did not meet everyone’s expectations. Although the residents had more space and better facilities compared with previous homes, there were nevertheless many issues to report.⁷⁴ Running water and electricity were still fairly new phenomena in Norwegian residential

70 Lars Ole Klavestad, *Arkitekturen i Fredrikstad. Arkitektur- og Byplanhistorien 1567–2014* (Fredrikstad: Gyldenstjerne Forlag AS, 2014), 50–51.

71 Klavestad, 50–53, 269–271 and 339–340.

72 Heier, Wester and Reinton, *Arctanderbyen 1911–2011*, 6.

73 Translated from: “Hvad husene angaar, har medaljen ogsaa sin bakside. Det ser ut som angjeldende arkitekt har set mere, for ikke at si utelukkende paa det utvendige utseende – paa virkningen i miljøet – end paa at faa det praktisk indrettet indvendig”. In Einar Lie, *Oslo Havebyselskap Gjennom 30 År*, 23.

74 Li, 17–24.

architecture and there was an element of trying, failing and learning from the initial mistakes.

The initial problems are part of the explanation for why the Norwegian garden city project took a different turn from the mid-1920s onwards. Another explanation is the gradual introduction of modernist impulses in Norwegian architecture and new ideas about what a modern lifestyle means. A third factor is the international discussion on housing in the mid-1920s, which revolved around the fundamental question of apartment blocks versus detached houses. Despite the fact that large-scale modernism was about to have a major breakthrough at that time, the majority of European and Norwegian planners still regarded the detached house as a superior solution.⁷⁵

Generation II: The Modern Norwegian Vernacular

In the 1920s, there was a belief that the garden city still had room for improvement. The main problem, according to Harald Hals, was that the concept had not yet been fully utilized in Norway:

The meaning of this term has been misinterpreted to a level of parody, and it has been endlessly exploited and misused in the service of advertisement. Once a popular phenomenon, it is now being used by any small enterprise to lure in a tiny garden spot between buildings, in suburbia or whatnot. The deeper significance of this concept as a starting point for a comprehensive planning system seems to have been fairly unknown.⁷⁶

In addition to the commercial exploitation of a social vision and the lack of holistic planning, Hals also worried about what we would call “green washing” in today’s vocabulary – marketing strategies disguised as environmental concerns. It is interesting to note that this topic was addressed at such an early stage.

75 Tvinnereim, “Internasjonale Byplankongressar og Norsk Byplanlegging 1920–1940,” 236.

76 Translated from: “Hvad dette begrep innebærer, har vært misforstått inntil det karikaturmessige, og uttrykket er i det uendelige blitt utnyttet og misbrukt i reklamens tjeneste. Engang populært er det blitt anvendt ved hvert lite anlegg, hvor en haveflekk er lurte inn mellom bebyggelsen, ved forstæder, eller hva det må være. Begrepets dypere innhold og mening som grunnlag for et omfattende system synes å ha vært lite kjent.” In Harald Hals, *Fra Christiania til Stor-Oslo* (Kristiania: H. Aschehoug & Co. (W. Nygaard), 1929), 26.

Those who propagated the garden city formula were fully aware of such objections and tried to anticipate them. A book called *Havebyer og Jordbruksbyer* [Garden Cities and Agricultural Cities], co-written by Ebenezer Howard and medical doctor Halfdan Bryn, was released in 1921. It was a summary of the situation so far and a cue to where Norwegian garden cities ideally could head.⁷⁷ A firm piece of advice is that Norway ought to come up with a garden city concept of its own. Howard's section opens with a declaration about the garden city's positive impact in Norway:

Over the past years I have witnessed, with great pleasure, how deeply engaged the Norwegian folk has become with the «garden city movement», and how eager many Norwegians are to employ its main principles in the enhancement of your own country's enormous resources.⁷⁸

Howard proceeds with a homage to the characteristics of the Norwegian landscape, the fjords and the mountains, and the agricultural traditions deeply imbedded in the Norwegian soul. These ingredients have to form the basis of the development ahead, he claims.⁷⁹ The importance of protecting and cultivating green values was obviously an interest shared by Hals and Howard. Bryn, for his part, emphasizes the trouble ahead – urban diseases, alcoholism, relentless population growth, unhealthy work environments – if Norwegian planning does not choose a different path. Unsurprisingly, that path is the garden city template, which he strongly recommends in the capacity of being a doctor with first-hand knowledge of society's health problems. His view on contemporary urban planning in Norway is bleak: “We have speculated on how to cram as many people as possible together in one house, and how many houses we can fit on one

77 Ebenezer Howard and Halfdan Bryn, *Havebyer og Jordbruksbyer* (Kristiania: Aschehoug & Co. (W. Nygaard), 1921).

78 Translated from: “Jeg har i noen år med store glede sett, hvor dypt interessert det norske folk er i «havebybevegelsen», og hvor ivrig mange norske er etter å bringe hovedprinsippene i denne bevegelse til anvendelse under utviklingen av deres eget lands veldige hjulpekilder.” In Howard and Bryn, 1.

79 Howard and Bryn, 14–15.

acre of land. We have to realize, the sooner the better, that this approach is completely insane.”⁸⁰

A transition was therefore on the cards as the 1920s progressed. The most distinctive architectural change is the transition from brick to timber construction systems. It is generally accepted that Oslo’s Tåsen Garden City (Fig. 12) is the first example of this transmutation. This project was initiated by Harald Hals, designed by the architect Henning Kloumann and completed in 1926.⁸¹ There had been some timber buildings within the English model, but those tended to be exceptions within a brick-based overall concept. And while there are earlier examples of municipal timber housing in Oslo and elsewhere, Tåsen Garden City is the first project that leaned thoroughly on garden city impulses. Many architects, including the creators of Sinsen Garden City, Einar Smith and Edgar Smith Berentsen, looked to Tåsen Garden City for inspiration in the following years.



Figure 12. Tåsen Garden City, Oslo, sometime between 1920 and 1929. Photo: J.H. Küenholdt A/S, archives of Nasjonalbiblioteket.

80 Translated from: “Vi har spekulert ut hvorledes vi best mulig kan stuve sammen så mange mennesker som mulig i ett hus og så mange hus som mulig på hvert mål jord. Vi må snarest mulig se til å bli klar over at dette er en rent sinnsvak fremgangsmåte.” In Howard and Bryn, 22.

81 Even Smith Wergeland, “På Biltur i Hagebyen,” *Fremtid for Fortiden*, no. 3 (2015): 43–45.

Even if Tåsen Garden City was a step in a new direction, it was still molded on the English template in terms of its architectural design, its structural layout and housing typology. Besides the timber construction frame and finish, it looked quite like Ullevål. What happened next was a conversion from the baroque and classicist stylistic approach to a simplified “wooden box” architecture, which can be associated with the stripped-down form of neo-classicism that became a trend in Norwegian architecture in the 1920s, as well as the arrival of modernist architecture.⁸² When I use the term “simplified”, I am not implying a reduction in quality. I am referring to a more minimalistic approach to decorative details, roof shapes, window types, façade composition and interior organization. In essence, it developed into a form of modern vernacular, with one foot in traditional crafts and one foot in new building techniques and building materials, like reinforced concrete. This happened gradually through discussions on how to revive traditions in Norwegian architecture – a quest which now became linked to modern domestic architecture and the big philosophical question of what is a good home.⁸³

The physical and psychological qualities of wood were a pivotal component of that debate and the changes it induced during the 1920s and '30s. The relationship between wood as a building material and the history of Norwegian building practices is absolutely crucial in that sense. Not only is wood eternally associated with the beacons of the national building heritage, like medieval stave churches and national romantic dragon-style ornamentation in the 19th century, it runs through the entire architectural history of Norway. Up until the 20th century, wood was almost unchallenged as the dominant building material, with the exception of inner-city construction in brick, which was enforced by law in the bigger cities from the mid-19th century onwards. Wood has retained its importance, especially in the residential sector of Norwegian architecture, where it remains hugely popular with the general population.⁸⁴

82 This is an illuminating piece on the “style wars” in Norwegian domestic architecture in the interwar period: Ingeborg Magerøy, “Villaens Viltre Blomstringstid,” *Fremtid for Fortiden*, no. 3 (2015): 114–121.

83 Nielsen, “Med Hjem Skal Landet Bygges,” 96–100.

84 Hans Granum and Erik Lundby, *Trehus 1965* (Oslo: Norges Byggforskningsinstitutt, 1964), 11–13.

A widespread use of wood does not automatically make buildings more “Norwegian” than buildings defined by other materials.⁸⁵ Wood is a common building material throughout the world, and not all buildings of national importance in Norway are made from wood. But there is a particular affinity for wood that has a tendency to resurface in the evolving reconfiguration of national architectural identity, and that has a lot to do with the idea of wood as a connection to tradition. This is strongly tied to a specific fondness for stand-alone houses. What Norwegians dream about is a single-family residence according to the architect and architectural historian Ulf Grønvold.⁸⁶

The continuing survival of this dream is deeply rooted in debates about housing and life quality in the first half of the 20th century, when single-family homes gained a number of “defense attorneys” in the field of planning and architecture. At a Nordic planning and housing conference held in Stockholm in 1927, Sverre Pedersen defended the garden city model over densification as the ultimate form of future development. This was *possible*, he explained, through modern means like electricity and rapid transport systems, and *preferable* due to its connection with Norwegian traditions.⁸⁷ This mixture of modernity and tradition is the core idea behind the second generation of garden cities.

The structural layout of garden cities also changed in the second wave, from row houses and semi-detached houses to individual houses. They would rarely consist of single-family residences only – houses with two, three or four sections were commonplace – but individual buildings were definitely more dominant. This in turn represents a transition of the housing typology, from flats to independent homes. “The people of Christiania are flat-bound tenants. A home of own’s own has been a privilege for the rich”,⁸⁸ wrote Hals in 1920, as he summarized a decade

85 Nils Georg Brekke, Per Jonas Nordhagen and Siri Skjold Lexau, *Norsk Arkitekturhistorie. Frå Steinalder og Bronsealder til det 21. Hundreåret* (Oslo: Samlaget, 2008), 450–455.

86 Ulf Grønvold, “Småhus,” *Byggekunst*, no. 3 (1983): 107, and Ulf Grønvold, “Hus og Holdninger,” *Byggekunst*, no. 2 (1990): 77–78.

87 Tvinneim, “Internasjonale Byplankongressar og Norsk Byplanlegging 1920–1940,” 236.

88 Translated from: “Kristianiafolk er leiegaardsfolk. Egnehemmet har længe været et rikmandsprivilegium.” In Harald Hals, *Ti Aars Boligarbeide i Kristiania* (Kristiania: J. Chr. Gundersens Boktrykkeri, 1920), 21.

of municipal housing schemes in Norway's capital. From now on, the aim was to turn that trend, and the new garden cities were supposed to become a vehicle for that.

Along with the architectural and structural alterations came the conviction that gardening and agriculture are deeply imbedded in Norwegian culture, hence the title of Howard and Bryn's book, *Garden Cities and Agricultural Cities*. Unlike the English-inspired garden cities, which often had tiny and quirky gardens, the "Norwegian-style" second generation came with proper gardens: large areas for varied cultivation and production. It was almost like a genuine piece of the countryside had landed in the city. In some cases, like Sinsen Garden City, that was true in an actual sense, since the whole area was formerly farmland before it was converted. The agricultural dimension was often used explicitly as a sales pitch for garden city properties, which I will return to in Chapter 2.

The critical resurrection of the garden city concept was a shared concern for many Norwegian architects and planners in the mid to late 1920s, when a new series of garden city settlements started to sprout. The all-timber Ekeberg Garden City in some ways resembled the newly-completed municipal housing project that lay alongside Valhallveien at Ekeberg, a so-called "colony for the homeless" [*husvilde-koloni*].⁸⁹ Whereas the colony only had residential architecture, the ambition was that Ekeberg Garden City would become "a self-sufficient little community";⁹⁰ clearly in tune with garden city thinking. It never became as big as the original vision – a "city within the city" of 12,000 to 15,000 people⁹¹ – but it had many large-scale features: a stand-alone building structure, multiple-family houses with a garden, a holistic architectural profile with a touch of individualism (each house had a different color). The blueprint was thereby laid.

89 Hals, 27–30.

90 "Ekeberg Hageby," *Nordstrands Blad*, January 21, 2008. <https://www.noblad.no/aktuell-historie/ekeberg-hageby/s/2-2.09-1.5116394>.

91 "Naar Skal det Blive Alvor af Ekeberg Haveby?" *Aftenposten*, October 14, 1922, 3.

In Bergen, local architect Leif Grung, a keen proponent of housing for all,⁹² was in charge of designing Jægers Minde Garden City. This work commenced in 1930 as a series of stand-alone houses combined with row houses. By the time of its completion in 1937, 58 houses had been built. Two garden cities in the county of Trøndelag show that impulses could sometimes shift back and forth between modernist and traditionalist even within the one concept. Sverre Pedersen was responsible for designing Bjørnli Garden City, which developed in several stages from Pedersen's original plan launched in 1917. This plan – typical for Pedersen's approach – included houses that were already on the site and the next phase of construction, which lasted until the late 1920s. This time span made it possible to incorporate a wide range of architectural styles and residential typologies, all built in timber.⁹³ A later example from the Trøndelag region, Strindheim Garden City in Trondheim (1948–51), shows that garden city projects in timber continued to have a place within Norwegian residential architecture during the post-war period.

The problem, as the latter example demonstrates, is that the garden city concept was becoming watered-down, much like Hals had predicted. Strindheim Garden City was a suburban neighborhood rather than a city. In Oslo, many examples from the second generation were indeed classified as “garden suburbs”. The planning and distribution of such areas largely followed the location of the suburban railway network, which was constructed precisely to connect the new residential areas with the existing city. This also came with a secondary function, namely to transport inner-city residents to the recreational green areas around the city.⁹⁴

Sogn Garden City (Fig. 13) is the ultimate example of housing and infrastructure combined. The enterprise in charge, A/S Akersbanerne, was a private company that worked closely with the Aker municipality in order to establish rail-based infrastructure in the suburban landscape

92 “Selvbyggerkolonien på Nymark,” Bergenbyarkiv.no, accessed December 13, 2021, <https://www.bergenbyarkiv.no/aarstad/archives/selvbyggerkolonien-pa-nymark/5045>.

93 Olav Ree, *Gruvesamfunnet Bjørnli Haveby* (Trondheim: Fagtrykk Trondheim AS, 2018), 31–61.

94 Magne Helvig, Kenneth J. Jones, Helene Kobbe and Ruth Norseng, *Oslo: Planning and Development* (Oslo: Oslo Town Planning Department, 1960), 25–27.



Figure 13. A/S Akersbanerne's 1929 sales catalogue for Sogn Garden City.

that surrounded the city of Oslo at the time. Sogn Garden City was thus conceived as an ambitious “tramway town”, closely tied to the route of what is known today as the Sognsvann Line, a rapid transit line on Oslo’s metro system.⁹⁵ An important basis for the 1929 sales catalog was the overall plan for Oslo’s rail-based infrastructure, issued in September 1920.⁹⁶ This was closely linked to the planning competition for Sogn Garden City, which was announced the same year.⁹⁷

The winner of this competition was architect Kristofer Lange, and the ensuing sales catalog promised a place of beauty, coziness, healthiness,

95 Elin Børrud, “Hagebyen som Forsvant i Funkisen: Historien om Sogn Haveby,” *Byminner* 150, no. 4 (1996): 23–24.

96 Oslo Kommune, *Stor-Oslo. Forslag til Generalplan* (Oslo: Det Mallingske Boktrykkeri, 1934), 143.

97 Børrud, “Hagebyen som Forsvant i Funkisen,” 22–23.

nature, family values and safety. The planning zone was described as “regulated according to the best of principles”⁹⁸ and perfectly located between the inner city and Oslo’s green belt, “in harmony between city and nature.”⁹⁹ Most important, perhaps, was the idea that Sogn Garden City represented a lesson learned, the “second coming”, in terms of garden city qualities:

Planners and architects will ensure that it [the garden city] is solid, beautiful and picturesque. Our time has taught us how to build such urban facilities.¹⁰⁰

This could be brushed off as nothing but a sales pitch, but the original plan for Sogn Garden City was equipped with an unusually detailed architecture and garden catalog that made the concept convincing and feasible. The plan also had the scale and ambition of a proper garden city. The Sogn area did not belong to the City of Oslo as it does today, and the realization of the garden city was based on a cross-municipal collaboration. This kind of regional scope was unusual in Norwegian planning at the time. In the early 1930s, when Sogn Garden City was under construction, Sverre Pedersen wrote that “The garden city idea has grown beyond the planning of single organisms in the city. It has taken on entire districts, whole regions in fact.”¹⁰¹

An important imperative for planners on both sides of the municipal border was to preserve some of Sogn’s rural qualities as the area made the leap towards urbanization. This was clearly stated in the overall vision, which underscored the value of green qualities as expressed by the individual gardens. The sales catalog contained detailed suggestions on how to organize the gardens (Fig. 14), how to maintain them, and where to place specific trees and plants.¹⁰² The architectural presentation of housing types – designed by a selection of Norway’s leading architects at the time – also emphasized the natural elements, access to light and favorable sun conditions. The inhabitants of Sogn Garden City were going to live their lives shrouded in green.

98 Translated from: “Regulert etter de beste prinsipper,” in *A/S Akersbanerne, Sogn Haveby* (Oslo: Fabritius, 1929), 1.

99 Translated from: “Harmoni mellom by og natur,” in *A/S Akersbanerne, Sogn Haveby*, 3.

100 Translated from: “Reguleringsmenn og arkitekter sørger for at den blir fast, vakker og malerisk. Vår tid har lært oss slike byanlegg,” in *A/S Akersbanerne, Sogn Haveby*, 5.

101 Sverre Pedersen, “De Nye Synspunkter i Byplanarbeidet,” *Byggekunst*, no. 6 (1932): 101.

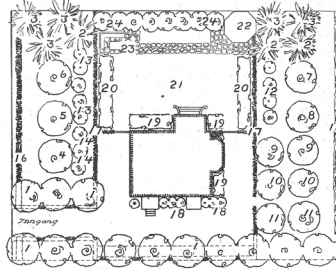
102 *A/S Akersbanerne, Sogn Haveby*, 11–19.



VILLA, BERG

tomten flat, må man vokte sig for å stykke den op med umotiverte veier eller med busker og blomster uten orden. Det hele blir da lett forvirret og meningsløst. Man lager en plan; det er klokt, ja nødvendig, man tenker den grundig igjennom, helst søker man faglig bistand. Men så må man heller ikke glemme å tenke sig, hvordan alt blir når det er vokset til. På en plan kan veiene spille en stor rolle og planter og trær en liten. Men i virkeligheten er det omvendt; der er veiene til praktisk bruk, til å gå på, og der er det trær og planter som ruver, de gir massene, tyngdene. Og man må tenke langt frem. Et tre kan være *satt og yndig* tett ved huset, så lenge det er lite. Om nogen år vil det skygge, og det vil skygge mer og mer, det dominerer allfor sterkt; da ser man at det står galt. Men det skulde man tenkt på da man plantet det.

HAVEPLAN
utarbeidet ved Akers beplantningsvesen.



BEPLANTNINGSPLAN

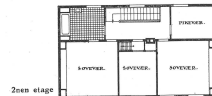
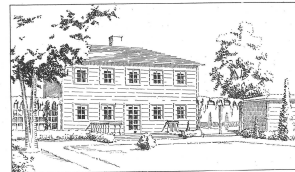
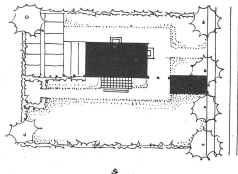
Nr.	Nr.	Nr.	Nr.
1. Lønn	15	13. Whinhams Industry og Løvets Triumfb, stikkelsber	5
2. Picea pungens glauca	14. Bang up solber		3
Sølvgran	15. Askerbringebær		27
3. Pinus cembra. Cembra-furu	16. Caraganaokkca. 5 s. pr. m		130
4. Åkerro. Epile	17. Ribes alpinum ca. 5 sek.		
5. Annie Elisabeth	18. Spiraea arguta, brudespiraea		7
6. Signe Tjilisch	19. Stauder og sommerblomster		ca. 18 m. ²
7. Transparente blanche	20. Stauder		ca. 140 m. ²
8. Siesstaholm	21. Pien		
9. Skyggekrebber	22. Gammelt lysthus		
10. Victoria plomme	23. Siteplass		
11. Gatr plomme	24. Syrniga rothamagensis		8
12. Rød hollandsk duerrips			

Hustype 90 m², 5 soveværelser, pikøverelse, bad, w.c. og kjøkken, for familie som behøver 3 soveværelser og pikøverelse (4 soverum).

I 1ste etasje, som har en høide av 2,50 m., kommer man gjennom et vindfang med tilstøtende w. c. inn i den lille lyste forstue med garderobe. Fra forstuen som gjennom garderober står i forbindelse med kjøkkenet, fører trapp opp til 2den etasje, og der direkte inn til storstuen, 7,00 x 4,25 m. Denne har kamin på den innvendige langvegg, bred glassdør ut til terrasse, og skyvedør inn til spisestuen. Stuens ene ubrutte vegg gir en utmerket plass for møblering, og med heldig siddfallende lys for malerier etc. Spisestuen, 4,75 x 4,25 m. har likesom stuen en hel ubrutt vegg med særlig sikte på anbringelse av skjenk. Gjennom arretningen står den i forbindelse med kjøkkenet som er helt elektrisk utstyrt, og har ventilert kjøleskap. Fra kjøkkeninngangen på husets bakside er der også nedgang til kjeller.

2den etasje, som har en høide av 2,40 m., har 3 soveværelser, pikøverelse og et rummelig bad som også står i direkte forbindelse med det ene soveværelse. Fra inngangen til det midterste soveværelse er der innbygget oppgang til loft.

Kjelleren rummer foruten bryggerhus, rullebod, matbod og et litet verkstedsrum også rum for centralopvarming og brensel. Der tenkes anlagt en garage med direkte innkjørsel fra gaten og forbundnet med huset ved en enkel pergola med slyngende blåregn. Tørkeplassen på husets bakside er skjermet mot nysyn fra haven ved en pergola med grindverk, likeledes bevosket med blåregn. I tomten nordvestre hjørne er kjøkkenhaven anlagt. Foran huset uttegges en stor gressplen kattet med stauder. Like inn til huset, på begge sider av den brede terrasse ligger rosenbedene. Den hellelagte havegang fører til et firkantet syrnibsthus i havens innerste del.



Arkitekt: Christian Astrup.
Hanstengst. 2. Telefon 44340.

Figure 14. Drawings of garden plans and housing types featured in the 1929 sales catalogue.

Despite good intentions, Sogn Garden City never quite delivered according to expectations. As Elin Børrud has explained, it did not become a complete garden with all the ingredients once listed by Howard.¹⁰³ In reality, it served as a generator of single-family residences and other forms of stand-alone houses: a housing plan rather than an urban plan. There were other institutions too, mostly schools, and small commercial hubs, like the business complex in Nils Lauritssøns vei at Berg, but not to an extent that would justify the term “city”. Another point in the critique is the economic aspect. Sogn Garden City was of little benefit to members of the lower classes and thereby in conflict with municipal priorities at the time.¹⁰⁴ In that sense, the garden cities of Oslo did not live up to the visionary social thinking. “The original ideology became increasingly diluted. The garden cities were mostly populated by the middle classes”,¹⁰⁵ wrote historian Leif Gjerland in 2019.

Børrud draws a similar conclusion: “The garden city gained less significance as a social reform movement than as an architectural expression.”¹⁰⁶ She also suggests that the architectural vocabulary may have fueled a sense of disenfranchisement among the working-class population, since the esthetic profile of the housing catalog was so openly middle-class.¹⁰⁷ What I find less accurate is Børrud’s application of the term “stylistic confusion” [*stilforvirringen*] to the architectural program.¹⁰⁸ I would rather describe the architecture of Sogn Garden City as an eclectic mixture of what was going on at the time in contemporary Norwegian architecture. If a given architect was mixing styles and construction systems, it does not automatically signal a state of confusion. It may just as well reflect a joy in having multiple options.

103 Børrud, “Hagebyen som Forsvant i Funkisen,” 19–33.

104 Hals, *Ti Aars Boligarbeide i Kristiania*, 10–18.

105 Translated from: “Den opprinnelige ideologien ble stadig mer utvannet. Hagebyene ble for det meste middelklassens populære boform.” In Leif Gjerland, “Byens Anti-revolusjonære Hagebyer,” *Aftenposten*, November 24, 2019, 24–25.

106 Translated from: “Hagebyen som sosial reform fikk mindre betydning enn hagebyen som arkitektonisk uttrykk.” In Børrud, “Hagebyen som Forsvant i Funkisen,” 19.

107 Translated from: “Det hele bærer preg av en målsetting om å skape et hyggelig villaområde for middelklassen.” In Børrud, 29.

108 Børrud, 31.

The one thing that really separates the two generations of Norwegian garden cities in architectural terms is the possibility of individually designed homes. In some cases, like Sogn, there was a catalog in advance, but not every home was built according to that. I therefore find *curiosity* more suitable as a term for the architectural legacy of the second generation than *confusion*. I shall be discussing this issue more closely in the following chapter, alongside some of the other subject matters I have introduced, such as class preferences, economic conditions, and the idea of the garden city as a union of nature and culture.

CHAPTER 2

The Unknown Garden City

People have heard about Oslo's garden cities – not least Ullevål Garden City and Lille Tøyen Garden City, which are architectural pearls and attractive places to live, both built in brick. Sinsen Garden City is different because it is newer and less known, hemmed in like a small slice of cake between the “Sinsen Traffic Machine” and local roads Lørenveien and Sinsenveien. But this is also one of Oslo's well-planned idyllic small neighborhoods.¹⁰⁹

I am reminded of the unknown status of Sinsen Garden City almost every time I try to describe the whereabouts of my home. Even taxi drivers, who should know the city's geography better than anyone, give me questioning looks in return. Normally I have to use the “Sinsen Traffic Machine”, an interchange that is one of Oslo's most notorious infrastructural landmarks,¹¹⁰ the local primary school, the local church, or the local main road, Lørenveien, as navigational props. Another issue is that most people immediately associate the name “Sinsen” with Sinsen City [*Sinsenbyen*], a large neighborhood just south of the railway lines, planned and built during the same period.¹¹¹ Unlike Sinsen Garden City, this is dominated by concrete architecture clad in brick – a modernist housing project

109 Translated from: “Oslos hagebyer har folk hørt om – ikke minst Ullevål hageby og Lille Tøyen hageby, arkitektoniske perler og attraktive boområder, begge steder murbebyggelse. Sinsen hageby skiller seg ut, er nyere og ikke like kjent der den ligger som et lite kakestykke mellom Sinsenkrysset, Lørenveien og Sinsenveien, men dette er en av Oslos gjennomtenkte, små idyller.” In Trond Lepperød, “Historien om Sinsen Hageby,” *sinsenboeren.blogspot.com*, accessed November 28, 2021, <http://sinsenboeren.blogspot.com/2018/01/historien-om-sinsen-hageby.html>).

110 There is an extensive analysis of this particular traffic landmark in my doctoral thesis: Even Smith Wergeland, “From Utopia to Reality: The Motorway as a Work of Art” (PhD diss., Oslo School of Architecture and Design, 2013), 348–364.

111 Sinsen City was designed by the architects Kristofer Lange and Thoralf Christian Hauff, and developed by a company called Brødrene Johnsen [the Johnsen Brothers], a local real estate and construction firm. Most of the scheme was completed between 1935 and 1939. See Helge Iversen, ed., *Sinsensboka* (Oslo: Sinsen Menighetsråd, 1981), 29–31.

typical of the architectural trends in Oslo at the time. Prior to its creation, the land belonged to a historical farm at Sinsen, Sinsen Farm [*Sinsen Gård*], which the wealthy Schou family sold to a building company called the Johnsen Brothers [*Brødrene Johnsen*] in 1934. They wasted no time: Three construction stages, 2,500 flats and 10,000 people were all in place by 1939 (Fig. 15). It was the largest construction project in Norway at the time and must have looked rather impressive upon its completion.¹¹²



Figure 15. A photo of Sinsen City in the late 1930s, when the neighborhood was brand new. Photo: Karl Harstad/Oslo Museum. Reproduced with the permission of the Oslo Museum; this image cannot be reused without permission.

The remote location, relatively speaking, explains why connectivity was a major theme whenever the development of Sinsen Garden City was mentioned in Oslo newspapers from 1929 onwards. One advertisement promises to get you “Home in 11 minutes from the main square in Oslo to Sinsen Garden City”.¹¹³ The downside of this convenience, however,

¹¹² Iversen, 28–31.

¹¹³ Translated from: “Hjem på 11 min. fra Stortorget til Sinsen haveby.” In “Hjem på 11 min.” *Aftenposten*, March 28, 1934, 12.

was the presence of three major traffic arteries to the north, west and south of the garden city: Trondheimsveien, Ring Road 3 and two railroad tracks. Those barriers have been there almost from the start and they have expanded over the years.¹¹⁴ They provide mobility, but they also bring noise and physical isolation. Sinsen Garden City has been a green, secret haven surrounded by traffic machinery ever since it first emerged.



Figure 16. Aerial photo of Sinsen Garden City, 1952. Photo: Widerøes Flyveselskap/Otto Hansen, © Oslo byarkiv. Reproduced with the permission of Oslo byarkiv; this image cannot be reused without permission.

From Farmland to Urban Fabric

Just like the Sogn area, Sinsen was under the jurisdiction of Aker municipality when the garden city idea was hatched. The head of planning, August Nielsen, had a clear vision of Aker's future:

¹¹⁴ In 2005, when the Sinsen Interchange was rebuilt and connected to a new tunnel system, 14 of the original Sinsen Garden City single-family homes were demolished in order to create more space for the road system. This operation caused a great deal of turmoil in the garden city before and after. See "Hus og Hager Må Vike for Ring 3-Tunnel," *Aftenposten*, February 23, 2003, 6.

The old farmer's mentality still remains strong within the population. To dwell freely in separate houses is what the general public desires. [...] Residential requirements shall therefore be covered by detached houses freely located in the terrain, as in a park. The Residential City of Aker is supposed to be a green city with an imminent presence of fields and trees, for all to behold. Both individual houses and tenements will be placed according to this vision.¹¹⁵

This contextual backdrop is important for three reasons: 1. The idea of Aker as a deliberate contrast to the ongoing densification of Oslo's inner city, "the high-rise city"¹¹⁶ as Nielsen termed it; 2. The importance of balancing individual and collective solutions, in and outside the home. Not every house could be a single-family unit; and 3. The need for variation in order to avoid monotonous environments.

The mission of delivering such qualities at Sinsen was given to Einar Smith and Edgar Smith Berentsen, an uncle and nephew separated in age by 32 years. They were two generations of architects in the same office, which they ran together from 1925 to 1930, when Smith passed away at the age of 67. He had previously run an office with his half-brother Ove Ekman, also an architect, and they carried out several large projects together from 1890 onwards, especially after the recruitment of another architectural partner, Carl Michalsen, in 1910. Michalsen's son Eystein was later appointed to the firm, which was a real family enterprise.¹¹⁷ When Smith left the office to team up with his nephew in 1925, he still kept it within the family.

The nephew, unlike his uncle (who was born and died in Oslo), was born abroad and died abroad, in the US and Spain respectively. His father worked as a medical doctor in Chicago and Minneapolis, and Smith Berentsen did not move to Norway until he was a teenager. He then

115 Translated from: "Den gamle bondementalitet hos befolkningen er ennu sterk, og ønsket om å bo fritt er alment. [...] Behovet for boliger skal dekkes ved hus liggende fritt plassert i terrenget som i en park. Boligbyen Aker skal være en grønnby hvor man alltid kan se at engang var her jorder og trær, og efter dette syn skal både villaer og leiegårder plasseres." In August Nielsen, *Aker 1837-1937* (Oslo: Aker Kommune, 1947), 451.

116 Translated from: "den høibebyggede by." In Nielsen, 451.

117 Unfortunately, there are few written sources on Einar Smith except Wikipedia and Store Norske Leksikon, which I have used here: "Einar Smith," Wikipedia, accessed January 13, 2022, https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Einar_Smith#cite_note-7, and "Einar Smith," Store Norske Leksikon, accessed January 13, 2022, https://nkl.snl.no/Einar_Smith. The same applies to his nephew.

proceeded to study architecture, in Trondheim and in Paris, and joined forces with his uncle after graduation, first in the existing office with Ekman and the Michalsens, then in a partnership with his uncle. Smith Berentsen also worked briefly for Lars Backer, one of Norway's first modernist architects, and the Aker Planning Department.¹¹⁸ The latter gave him a direct connection to the planning activities that August Nielsen was about to launch. It is likely that the combination of the uncle's experience and the nephew's fresh expertise and network landed them the commission of making a zoning plan for Sinsen Garden City.

Despite intensive archival research, I have not been able to trace the exact circumstances. There seems to have been a division between the public interests of Aker municipality, which wanted to create more residential areas, and the private interests of Olaf Løken, an Oslo-based mason who took charge of the whole process of selling the plots in addition to much of the initial construction work. Løken can be described as a hybrid between a salesman and a constructor, what we would call an entrepreneurial type today. Through his company, A/S Standardbygg, he controlled operations to a great extent and sometimes appeared as an interview object, acting as an official spokesperson for the Garden City. In May 1935, under the heading "Sinsen Garden City in full flow",¹¹⁹ Løken talked about the marvelous views, the practical economic arrangements and the "colossal" improvements in building standards compared to earlier examples in Oslo – everything, essentially, that had been promised in the earlier newspaper advertisements (Fig. 17).

Sinsen Garden City was developed according to a zoning plan that was approved in 1929,¹²⁰ followed by the division into lots a year later.¹²¹ Smith and Smith Berentsen were in charge of both procedures. Interestingly, as shown in a rendering of the model of the entire plan (Fig. 18), Sinsen City

118 "Edgar Smith Berentsen," Wikipedia, accessed January 13, 2022, https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Smith_Berentsen, and "Edgar Smith Berentsen," Store Norske Leksikon, accessed January 13, 2022 https://nkl.sn.no/Edgar_Smith_Berentsen.

119 "Sinsen Haveby er i Skuddet," *Akersposten*, May 31, 1935, p. 3.

120 Unfortunately, this plan appears to be missing from the municipal archives but the official archival entry is as follows: Aker Reguleringsråd, Sinsen – Regulerings- og bebyggelsesplan for en del av området – Vedtatt 14.08.1929 av Reguleringsrådet i sak 14018/29.

121 Iversen, *Sinsenboka*, 28.



Figure 17. A newspaper advertisement from November 1932 announcing the arrival of Sinsen Garden City. Photo: © Dagbladet. Reproduced with the permission of Dagbladet; this image cannot be reused without permission.

was included in the regulation plan; perhaps not formally, but at least for contextual purposes. This demonstrates an awareness right from the start about the mutual dependence of these areas.

The plan for the garden city included space for 124 individual buildings with roughly a quarter of an acre of land for each property. This was broadly announced in the newspapers in 1929 and 1930 through several recurring advertisements with the same message: “Sinsen Garden City, housing lots for sale on the border of the city with a lovely view of the townscape and the fjord.”¹²² Other newspaper entries stressed the convenient location at the outer limits of the city and the beginning of the countryside, in close proximity to modern roads and traffic junctions. Although the garden city was not entirely complete until 1940, the development was still quite rapid. By October 1930, seven houses had already

¹²² Translated from: “Sinsen Haveby, tomter til salgs, beliggende like ved bygrensen med herlig utsikt over by og fjord.” In “Sinsen Haveby,” *Aftenposten*, July 26, 1929, 5.

Den store utparsellering på Sinsen

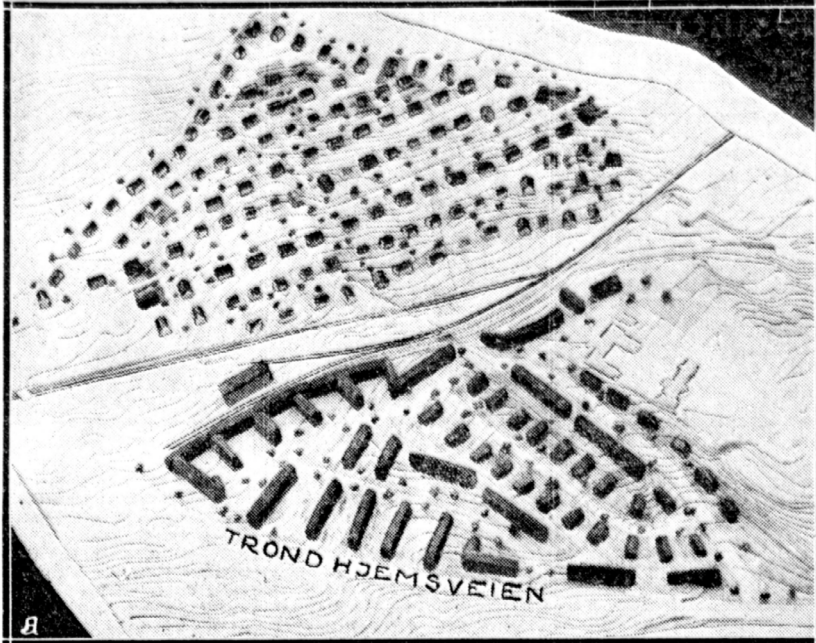


Figure 18. The zoning for Sinsen Garden City north of the railroads and Sinsen City south of the railroads, as displayed in *Aftenposten*, October 30, 1930. Photo: © Aftenposten. Reproduced with the permission of Aftenposten; this image cannot be reused without permission.

been built, and local roads, sewerage systems, water supplies and power supplies were underway. The archive reveals that the project ran smoothly, driven by the architects – who designed all the early houses plus a set of catalog drawings for future use¹²³ – in collaboration with the garden city board and Olaf Løken. The first newspaper articles mention the sensible location of commercial buildings in relation to homes and the careful coordination of the color and shape of the buildings.

While small in scale compared to Ebenezer Howard's original template, Sinsen Garden City nevertheless had the stature of a larger settlement and several recognizable garden city features, such as the relative diversity of functions. When the elementary school and the high school were completed, in 1938 and 1939 respectively, it looked like a proper community. Both schools were designed by the Bergen-born architect Georg

123 "Sinsen Haveby," *Akers Vel*, October 2, 1931, 2.

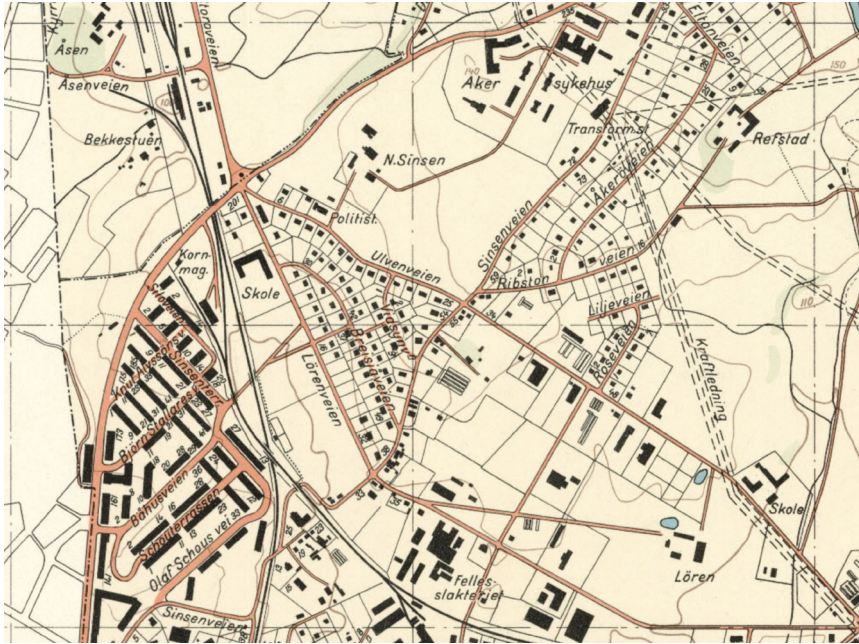


Figure 19. A map of the Municipality of Aker, 1938, with Sinsen Garden City almost in the center. Photo: Oslo byarkiv, https://www.oslo.kommune.no/OBA/Kart/1938/images/Blad_2.jpg.

Greve – a prominent figure in the Norwegian architectural scene in the interwar period – who in many ways epitomized the mixture of tradition and modernity that defines the architectural identity of Sinsen Garden City.

Solid and Practical Architecture

The earliest houses within the planning area were built before zoning approval had been given. The first house was erected in 1902 as a home for the composer Johannes Haarklou, designed by Carl Michalsen eight years before he went into partnership with Einar Smith. This was neoclassical architecture with a touch of the Swiss chalet style, which was hugely popular in Norwegian architecture in the latter half of the 19th century. It was converted into a local police station in 1911, a function it fulfilled until 1969. After that, it remained in use as a residence until 2005, when it was demolished along with 13 other houses when the Ring Road 3 Tunnel was constructed between Sinsen and Økern.



Figure 20a. Sinsen Garden City viewed from the school roof in the late 1930s.
Photo: photographer unknown, J.H. K nholdt A.S/Oslo Museum.



Figure 20b. Sinsen Garden City viewed from the school roof in June 2022.
Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.   Even Smith Wergeland.

The other two existing buildings, both erected in 1920, are the same timber houses that are still located in the far western corner of the area. The buildings from 1920 were originally owned by the state and built to accommodate clerks who worked for the National Directorate for Provisions [*Statens provianteringsdirektorat*]. These two houses, both designed by the architect Gustav Guldbrandsen, have gable roofs with a steeper profile than the average roof in the garden city, where the majority of buildings have tented roofs, which are polygon hipped roofs with a fairly gentle slope downwards to the walls. Some have pyramid roofs, which are the same as tented roofs but with a square base.

The newspapers of Aker and Oslo monitored progress on Sinsen Garden City as it began to take form. According to a feature article in *Akersposten*, “The houses are pretty and simple, and the location is beautiful.”¹²⁴ Clearly, this was not thought of as magnificent architecture. It was rather viewed as a useful contribution to the ongoing expansion of Oslo and a convenient way of managing the consequential population growth in Aker. In many ways, this was about as everyday as architecture can be—an early modern vernacular, an “intermediate form” of housing that foreshadowed other housing typologies across Norway in the decades to come.¹²⁵

There was a lot of discussion at the time on how to combine the best elements from European and Nordic architecture. An organization called *Nordisk Bygningsdag* [the Nordic Building Association] hosted a series of conferences on Nordic building culture, and the third event in the series was held in Oslo between June 16–18 1938. A printed report was issued afterwards, in which the building policy of Aker was mentioned in favorable terms.¹²⁶ There is no specific reference to Sinsen Garden City but Aker received general praise for its high-standard, effortlessly modern housing architecture. That is a precise summary of what the municipality was aiming for and is an accurate description of how Sinsen Garden City continued to develop during the 1930s.

124 Translated from: “Husene er pene og enkle, og beliggenheten er flott.” In “Det Nye Aker,” *Akersposten*, September 22, 1931, front page.

125 Bing and Johnsen, “Innledning: Nye Hjem i Mellomkrigstiden,” 20–22.

126 Harald Aars, Harald Hals and J. E. Orvin, eds. *Nordisk Bygningsdag* (Oslo: NBD, 1938).

There are few classical details to be seen on the houses that were built from the mid 1930s onwards, other than the absence of completely flat roofs. Many of the architects involved, for instance Christian Due Astrup, who designed a single-family home at Breisjåveien 38, can safely be placed within a modernist framework. Some of the older architects who were commissioned, like Einar Nilsen, who designed a horizontally-divided dual-family home on the property next to Astrup's house, ventured beyond their classical training at this point.

The most unifying architectural feature of Sinsen Hageby is the extensive use of timber as a cladding and construction material. Concrete and brick were also used, especially in basement structures and supporting structures between floors, but timber is the most common material. This conforms with the ideals of Norwegian architects at the time as discussed in the previous chapter, but it also points to debates in the present about climate in relation to building practices. Timber is considered nowadays as a renewable and sustainable building material, and this has sparked a revival of interest in using it.¹²⁷ Not only does it have a lighter carbon footprint than brick, steel and concrete, it also has a significant potential in regard to maintenance, which makes it durable and resilient. Maintenance, as Hillary Sample suggests, “will become increasingly important as architects adopt practices that are to affect environmental performance and also the making of environments.”¹²⁸

Although the architecture of Sinsen Garden City is modern, it has a connection to traditional Norwegian timber construction. The keywords are quality wood, craftsmanship and maintenance. If the basis is sound, sustainability can be maintained through simple actions. The houses of Sinsen Garden City were marketed as “solid and practical” and the finished result has largely delivered what the advertisements promised. The roof of the house where my family lives dates from 1939 and has never been repaired. In 2022, after a couple of minor leaks beside the chimney, the housing association hired a construction company that specializes in

127 Jim Coulson, *A Handbook for the Sustainable Use of Timber in Construction* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2020).

128 Hillary Sample, *Maintenance Architecture* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016), 7.

traditional crafts to make a technical assessment. They confirmed that the entire roof can be repaired as it is, which means that the original brick roof tiles and the load-bearing timber structure can be preserved. Some tiles will have to be replaced and damage to the timber may be uncovered when restoration begins. But everything can be repaired and that is the point here: well-crafted timber buildings withstand the test of time exceptionally well.

For some jobs, like the roof repairs, professionals are needed. But another sustainable aspect of timber architecture of this kind is that it can be kept in good condition by the residents themselves, through fairly manageable caretaking routines like painting and other forms of damage prevention. Of course, not everyone likes to carry out maintenance and it can cost more than you expect, but it is nevertheless a fairly small sacrifice. Most people who own a property accept the investment and effort it takes to care for it, especially since good maintenance is favorable for the economy as well as the environment.



Figure 21a. Lørenveien 2, a prayer house in 1956. Photo: Leif Ørnelund/Oslo Museum (OB.Ø56/1569).



Figure 21b. Lørenveien 2 in 2022, a locale for cultural activities for teenagers.
Photo: Even Smith Wergeland. © Even Smith Wergeland.

Not every house is made from timber, however. In fact, a closer look at Sinsen Garden City reveals a number of discrepancies that makes it difficult to define conclusively. Two buildings stand out completely due to the choice of materials: brick instead of timber. One of them is situated at Lørenveien 2 (Fig. 21), which currently serves as a locale for cultural activities for teenagers. It was originally built to be a prayerhouse and residence, custom-made to suit that combination in 1937 by Hugo A. Brustad, who was an architect and mason. He created a support system of brick and cast-concrete decks, and the façade was painted brick. The building was described thus in *Aftenposten* in 1941: “At the very entrance to Sinsen Garden City stands a strange brick house. It has a huge chimney above the gable and two covered side entrances.”¹²⁹ How very strange indeed. The other oddity in the neighborhood is a brick house at Breisjåveien 33, designed by architect Trygve Gierløff. This single-family residence was commissioned by a mason, Holst-Larsen, who had formal responsibility for the building application. He thereby had a direct influence on the construction system and finishings.

129 Translated from: “Ved selve entreen til Sinsen Haveby står et pussig murhus. Det har en svær pipe over gavlen og to overbyggede sideinnganger.” In “Sinsen Haveby,” *Aftenposten*, April 25, 1941, 3.

Such deviations from the norm demonstrate that there was a degree of variation as Sinsen Garden City progressed from proposal to realization. This is hardly surprising since the process involves different architects, developers, builders and clients. If you add to that the intricate mix of housing types, from single-family to multi-family homes, it becomes more understandable that these garden cities have appeared “confusing” in the eyes of some beholders, even if the term is inaccurate. On top of this are the changes that have taken place over the years, such as the replacement of original buildings with new building types, for instance the two dual-family residences that replaced Astrup’s single-family home at Breisjåveien 38 in 2016.

This particular process fueled a series of complaints by the Sinsen Residents’ Association, which submitted a number of official protests as the case went through the system. An important point of reference were the regulations for building individual houses in Oslo [*Småhusplanen*].¹³⁰ According to these regulations, argued the Residents’ Association, areas like Sinsen Garden City were supposed to be governed with architectural harmony and structural consistency in mind, to prevent “alien objects” like apartment buildings and other forms of housing with multiple units. This argument failed to convince the Plan and Building Department, however, and as the Municipal Office for Cultural Heritage Management did not find Astrup’s home worthy of protection, the proposal went ahead.¹³¹ Similar procedures have taken place elsewhere in Sinsen Garden City too, mainly during the 2000s. The overall plan for individual houses has been a source of much debate over the past 20 years. One of the major issues is the balance between development and densification on the one hand, and the existing values and local character on the other, as I will come back to in Chapter 3.

130 This plan first gained political approval in 1997 and has subsequently been revised in 2006 and 2013, with additional guidelines and recommendations added in 2016 and 2019. The plan as a whole is currently undergoing a complete revision.

131 Detailed information about the complaints, the authorities’ response and the process as a whole can be found in the official building applications: “Breisjåveien 38 – Oppføring av tomannsbolig – Hus A” <https://innsyn.pbe.oslo.kommune.no/saksinnsyn/casedet.asp?caseno=201515116>, “Breisjåveien 38 – Oppføring av tomannsbolig – Hus B” <https://innsyn.pbe.oslo.kommune.no/saksinnsyn/casedet.asp?caseno=201515150>, and “Breisjåveien 38 – Riving av enebolig” <https://innsyn.pbe.oslo.kommune.no/saksinnsyn/casedet.asp?caseno=201515108>.

Common people?

If the architecture of Sinsen Garden City can be described as solid with a dash of class, then the first generation of residents can be described as common folk with a degree of affluence. They typically ran small businesses, or worked as teachers, clerks, or other typical middle-class jobs.¹³² As I have touched upon earlier, the entrance ticket was not affordable for everyone. The buyers had to cover 20% of the building costs in cash and thereafter commit to a combination of a mortgage on the open market combined with a bond loan at 6% interest. The whole operation was administrated by a private limited company, which probably made it easier for each owner to handle the economic model.¹³³ But only for those who had the financial resources to hurdle past the basic costs.

Unlike the selection of Norwegian garden cities that were initiated through municipal support and/or cooperative solutions,¹³⁴ Sinsen Garden City was solely based on the economic framework developed by Løken, who had to make a profit on top of footing the construction bills. The pragmatic “solution” to previous garden city failures seems to have been a change of demographic attention, from the working classes to the middle classes, specifically those employed in clerical jobs [*funksjonærklassen*]. A survey of the distribution of trades in Oslo, based on the 1930 Census, shows that the clerical sector was overrepresented in the western part of the city. Areas like Ullevål and Nordberg – both part of Sogn Garden City – had more clerks than workers and foremen combined.¹³⁵

But who were the clerks, exactly? According to Michael Hopstock, this group is notoriously difficult to categorize, simply because it is highly diverse in both economic and social terms. In Hopstock’s study of Holtet Garden City in Oslo, the clerks gravitate towards a working-class identity – as *laborers* they have much in common with their working-class neighbors.¹³⁶ The geographic origin of the residents, the specifics of their

132 Iversen, *Sinsensboka*, 28.

133 The terms are mentioned in several newspaper articles and they vary a bit in terms of figures and accuracy. This entry goes into more detail than the others: “Sinsen Haveby er i Skuddet,” *Akersposten*, May 31, 1935, 3.

134 Bing and Johnsen, “Innledning: Nye Hjem i Mellomkrigstiden,” 21.

135 Oslo Reguleringsvesen, *Generalplan for Oslo* (Oslo: Oslo Kommune, 1960), 61.

136 Hopstock, “Holtet Hageby – En Rød Bydel?” 133.

work environment and the neighborhood culture may have counted as much as income and education level in the formation of class identity at Holtet. Based on the occupational status listed by the clients in the building applications,¹³⁷ it seems unlikely that the first residents of Sinsen Garden City had a similar affiliation with the working classes. But the majority were “common people” who probably regarded themselves as regular workers, in the broad sense of the term. The privileges of living in Sinsen Garden City must have been evident at the time – a convenient location, comfortable housing, garden spaces for all, a spacious park, two schools and more – but the area was not as exclusive as it is today.

Outdoor Life, All Year Round

The essence of Sinsen Garden City, both then and now, is its green character. Or, to be more precise, the spaces that are green during spring and summer, multi-colored during the fall and grey or white during winter. Oslo is a city where the cycle of the seasons is truly noticeable, and the garden cities are places where the seasonal changes can be observed on each property as well as in the common spaces. The whole spectrum of seasonal qualities must be taken into consideration if the landscape dimension is to be described properly.

The best example at Sinsen is the park between the two schools, Sinsenjordet (Fig. 22), a remnant of the old Sinsen Farm. This has served as a public space ever since buildings started to emerge on either side of the railroad lines and was formalized as a park and recreational space through a zoning plan in 1948. Various plans have been launched over the years to create more designated space for sports, but the only sports venues that exist today are the courts of the Sinsen Tennis Club and a sand court for beach volleyball beside them. The volleyball court used to be a skating rink for ice skating and ice hockey. Other than that, the park is an open space for free use, physical activity or purely recreational purposes. Besides the connection to the old Sinsen Farm, which means

¹³⁷ The clients' occupations are not listed in every case. A more precise answer to this question would demand further demographic and sociological inquiry.



Figure 22. Sinsenjordet, the local park, in June 2022. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.
© Even Smith Wergeland.

that a crucial piece of the cultural history is still present, the park also has a World War II memorial in remembrance of all the local Jews who were deported to concentration camps during the war. The park is, in other words, a hugely important landmark and an invaluable asset for people who live in the area. It is a place where children can play, teenagers can hang out and adults can socialize outdoors, relieved for a while from work duties, social media and computer screens.

This sort of neighborhood value was recognized and prioritized during the process that led to the 1929 General Plan for Oslo. For Harald Hals and his colleagues, it was crucial to maintain the park-like character of Oslo, especially the five valleys that defined the landscape historically. A remainder of one of those, Torshovdalen, is located just west of Sinsen, and Sinsenjordet has the same sloping terrain. The importance of skiing is mentioned several times in the General Plan – a very “Norwegian” desire, and definitely a typical Oslo phenomenon.¹³⁸ Sinsen Garden City, with its own little slope for skiing and sledding, is a living example of this legacy.

¹³⁸ Oslo Kommune, *Stor-Oslo. Forslag til Generalplan*, 203.

Legacy Issues

Oslo's "unknown" garden city is not listed as a cultural environment like several of the others, but approximately one third of the properties appear on the Yellow List [*Gul liste*], which is a municipal register of objects and areas with known cultural heritage value. Unlike heritage objects with a legislative status, the properties at Sinsen do not have formal protection. The Yellow List makes sure that every building application has to be processed by the Municipal Office for Cultural Heritage Management. The Office can make recommendations but does not have the direct authority to prevent things from happening.

It is probably more accurate to say that Sinsen Garden City is partially protected. Changes have occurred, as mentioned, but it would be surprising if the whole structure comes under pressure as a potential zone for *tabula rasa* urbanism. A lot has been built in the surrounding areas over the past decades, most notably in Løren, and the next wave of urban development will be located further east, in Økern. In light of the latest version of the regulations for building individual houses in Oslo, which is currently under revision, it seems less likely that neighborhoods like Sinsen Garden City will be singled out as densification zones. The revised version builds on a clear ambition to prevent further densification of areas with detached housing.

This raises new discussions on the garden city legacy. It has been a fairly common point of view to regard the garden city as "something of a museum piece,"¹³⁹ as Buder suggested in 1990. If more protective overall zoning is approved in Oslo, the museum-like character of Sinsen Garden City will perhaps become more apparent. But there are reasons beyond architecture to argue that Sinsen Garden City is not a museum. The environmental cause has catapulted the garden city and similar green concepts into the limelight again as vital resources in the city. Buder saw the contours of this revival when he glanced into the garden city future in 1990: "Still the challenges to the environment could, in time, force a reconsideration of our present values and the cities and suburbs they have created." He could hardly have been more prophetic.

139 Buder, *Visionaries and Planners*, 211.

Another topic of great significance is the relationship between sustainability and livability. A key question in urban development up until now has been as follows: What do we need to sacrifice in the existing environment in order to improve the city? Cities have always made sacrifices in times of rapid change. Sinsen Garden City is no exception to that rule. On the contrary, it once displaced a historically important farm and valuable agricultural soil. If such an act of destruction is going to be justified, the replacement must be of high quality and societal value. Now that circular economy principles are being applied to planning and architecture,¹⁴⁰ the value of everything that already exists increases. One consequence is that old buildings are being recognized more widely as part of the environmental cause. This makes it harder to defend wasting resources even if the motivation is a higher building standard. At a strategic level, *tabula rasa* urbanism is being challenged by *tabula plena* urbanism,¹⁴¹ which focuses on urban sites that are already occupied by buildings and ecosystems. Instead of demolition, this strategy seeks to care for resources that have accumulated over time by optimizing them, for instance through transformation, adaptive reuse or other preservation techniques. This development is important to bear in mind ahead of the last chapter, since the choice between replacement or preservation lies at the core of the debate about urban desirability and suburban livability. What a city desires, from a professional planning perspective, is not necessarily the same as what the citizens want – the crux of what Neuman calls “the urban desirability versus suburban livability paradox”,¹⁴² to which I shall soon return.

140 Hilde Remøy, Alexander Wandl, Denis Ceric and Arjan van Timmeren, “Facilitating Circular Economy in Urban Planning”, *Urban Planning* 4, no. 3 (2019): 1–4.

141 Bryony Roberts, ed., *Tabula Plena. Forms of Urban Preservation* (Basel: Lars Müllers Publishers, 2016).

142 Neuman, “The Compact City Fallacy,” 12,

CHAPTER 3

The Future of the Garden City

This chapter is about the garden city's status, value and justification in today's discourse on urban development, life quality and nature in the city. "As a model for decentralization to small settlements, characterized by a human environment for all to enjoy, it has played a significant role in the past and continues to do so,"¹⁴³ argues the English planning historian Dennis Hardy. But how, in what ways, and to which degree? That is the question at stake.

Since the late 1980s, "the garden city has crept back onto the planning agenda",¹⁴⁴ as Ward confirms. One might also argue that it never left, since variations on the theme were constantly rearticulated during the 20th century, from new towns via satellite towns to suburbias of all kinds. As Hardy puts it: "Garden cities, it might be concluded, have to be seen as part of rather than apart from the broader currents of twentieth-century history. No-one would seriously claim that Howard's blueprint is still valid in its entirety, but the essence of his proposals retains an enduring lure. [...] In some respects the applicability of the garden city idea is greater now than it was a century ago."¹⁴⁵ This was written in 1992, but it has only grown more relevant in light of the urgent environmental issues that society has to handle at present. Even suburbia is back on the urban menu, argued Hardy in 2012: "It might seem incongruous to portray the suburbs – so often vilified as neither urban nor rural – as a utopian ideal. Yet that is exactly what they were, and, for many, still are."¹⁴⁶

143 Dennis Hardy, "The Garden City Campaign: An Overview," in *Garden City: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Stephen V. Ward (London: Spon, 1992), 187.

144 Ward, "The Garden City Introduced," 1.

145 Hardy, "The Garden City Campaign: An Overview," 204.

146 Dennis Hardy, "Plots of Paradise: Gardens and the Utopian City," in *Earth Perfect. Nature, Utopia and the Garden*, eds. Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs, 179.

One reason for this might be some kind of collective longing for past qualities, as cities continue to grow in height, scale and density. Mark Crinson talks about “the ‘villaging’ of city centres to evoke lost or mythical forms of public life.”¹⁴⁷ Near my own neighborhood in Sinsen, a lot of history has disappeared over the past decades in the name of urban development. This enhances the fear of a corresponding scenario in the garden city. Similar concerns have been aired throughout other areas in Oslo, where single-family housing is the dominant typology.¹⁴⁸ Densification in such areas tends to drive a wedge between the politicians and planning experts on one side and the residents on the other. The antipathy towards densification runs parallel with the aversion against “villaging” among proponents of compact city development.

Densifying the Compact City

Densification is an urban development strategy that has been met with both resistance and trust for more than 100 years. Around 1900, when Howard made his mark on the planning discourse, it happened against a backdrop of general criticism against high density dwellings.¹⁴⁹ A hundred years later, the situation is completely the opposite but the battle essentially remains the same: It is a competition between two different planning strategies, densification versus decentralization, and two different urban ideals, the compact city versus the garden city/garden suburb. There are a host of positions along these axes, from the eager supporters of both to scholars who ask critical questions in almost every direction: How dense is too dense? Do single-family houses even belong in a city? Do compact neighborhoods stimulate social life and mutual respect between people from diverse backgrounds, or do they intensify differences and disagreements? It was precisely these intricate questions Harald Hals addressed in his critical remarks about the international

¹⁴⁷ Mark Crinson, ed., *Urban Memory. History and Amnesia in the Modern City* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), xi.

¹⁴⁸ See Marianne Brenna, “Ikke Til Salgs—Kampen om Småhusområdenes Herlighetsverdier” (master’s thesis, Oslo School of Architecture and Design, 2020).

¹⁴⁹ Buder, *Visionaries and Planners*, 71.

garden city movement in 1929. What he wanted, most of all, was to avoid remote satellites on the one hand and inner-city neighborhoods without enough space on the other.¹⁵⁰ We are still trying to tackle these issues.

Norwegian cities have been densifying in order to follow the growing ideal of compact living since the 1990s.¹⁵¹ Few cities have felt this more than Oslo, where densification has had broad political and administrative support.¹⁵² A report from 2008 confirmed that the level of densification had increased to more than three times the average of what was considered tolerable in the 1980s and '90s.¹⁵³ Løren, where former industrial buildings have been systematically replaced with residential buildings since 2004, is a typical example of this form of development (Fig. 23). In recent years, the densification rate has intensified in single-family housing areas across the city.¹⁵⁴ The so-called “apple-yard densification” of Oslo has been a source of much debate.¹⁵⁵ While it makes sense from a spatial point of view to densify such areas, the method seldom gains local support.

The reality is, however, that a city would not be a city without a certain concentration of humans and buildings. As Inger-Lise Saglie has argued: “When discussing densities in a city, we are really discussing the key concepts for cities. Logically, therefore, discussion of densities in the city is not a discussion about whether or not cities should be dense or not, but a discussion about the level of densities in the city within a given cultural context.”¹⁵⁶ A high concentration of people does not guarantee life quality,

150 Hals, *Fra Christiania til Stor-Oslo*, 23–29.

151 Petter Næss, Inger-Lise Saglie and Kine Halvorsen Thorén, “Ideen om den Kompakte Byen i Norsk Sammenheng,” in *Kompakt Byutvikling. Muligheter og Utfordringer*, eds. Gro Sandkjær Hanssen, Hege Hofstad and Inger-Lise Saglie (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2015), 36–47.

152 Bengt Andersen, Joar Skrede, Hanna Hagen Bjørgaas and Yngvild Margrete Mæhle, “Fortetting som Verktøy og Mål i Oslo,” *Plan* 50, no. 4 (2018): 16–23.

153 Jon Guttu and Lene Schmidt, *Fortett med Vett. Eksempler fra Fire Norske Byer* (Oslo: Miljøverndepartementet, Husbanken and NIBR, 2008), 9.

154 Waldemar Holst, “Fortetting av Byggesonen i Oslo Kommune i Perioden 2010–2020: En Kartlegging av Utbygging det Siste Tiåret” (master’s thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU), 2021), 51.

155 Brenna, “*Ikke til Salgs – Kampen om Småhusområdenes Herlighetsverdier*,” 2020.

156 Inger-Lise Saglie, “Density and Town Planning: Implementing a Densification Policy” (PhD diss., Oslo School of Architecture and Design, 1998), 57.

however. How people behave, what they want, where they are in life and what they can afford are factors of equal importance.¹⁵⁷

Densification is strongly associated with the compact city, a term coined by George Bernard Dantzig and Thomas L. Saaty in the early 1970s.¹⁵⁸ But densification is not synonymous with the compact city, argues Børrud. A really dense monofunctional area, like a cluster of high-rise apartment buildings, does not qualify as a compact urban form.¹⁵⁹ Another issue is that the three most prominent forms of sustainability in urban planning – economic, environmental and social sustainability – are not always compatible. That is one of the most challenging aspects of the compact city as a planning ideal.¹⁶⁰



Figure 23a. The new apartment blocks in Løren typically have shared green spaces in the middle. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland. © Even Smith Wergeland.

157 Saglie, 80–81.

158 George Bernard Dantzig and Thomas L. Saaty, *Compact City: A Plan for a Liveable Urban Environment* (New York: W. H. Freeman & Co., 1973).

159 Elin Børrud, “Nytt Blikk på Fortetting som Byutviklingsstrategi,” *Plan* 50, no. 4 (2018): 24–25.

160 Gro Sandkjær Hanssen, Hege Hofstad, Inger-Lise Saglie, Petter Næss and Per Gunnar Røe, eds. “Hvorfor Studere den Kompakte Byen?” in *Kompakt Byutvikling. Muligheter og Utdfordringer*, eds. Gro Sandkjær Hanssen, Hege Hofstad and Inger-Lise Saglie (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2015), 15–17.



Figure 23b. This apartment complex at Løren is part of a bigger project called Krydderhagen, which was nominated for the annual architecture award in Oslo in 2020. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland. © Even Smith Wergeland.



Figure 23c. Some of the common areas in Løren have facilities for cultivation. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland. © Even Smith Wergeland.

Despite the fact that these contradictions are quite well-known, the compact city is nevertheless promoted as a fundamentally positive form of urban development by many contemporary architects and planners. In some cases, high density is advertised almost as a guarantee for an

attractive neighborhood, as Per Gunnar Røe has shown.¹⁶¹ The problem with that, as Katie Williams has uncovered, is that sustainable solutions will not occur simply by increasing densities and mixing uses.¹⁶² Similar concerns have been raised by Elizabeth Burton, who points out that social equity only has a limited relation to compactness of form when all factors are taken into consideration. If a planning scheme fails, social equity is more often than not negatively affected by urban compactness.¹⁶³ There are disadvantages as well as benefits with high-density urban living.¹⁶⁴ Lene Schmidt has detected the same ambiguity in a Norwegian context, where she has found that densification is likely to have a positive effect on transport habits, social life, services and job opportunities, but equally likely to have a negative impact on apartments and outdoor spaces due to reductions in size.¹⁶⁵ She has also warned against a recent legislative change in the Norwegian building regulations, which makes it possible to build apartments with no direct access to sunlight.¹⁶⁶

One of the most emphatic critiques of the compact city is Neuman's article "the compact city fallacy", a systematic study of its alleged failures. These appear on many levels, he argues, mainly because the concept suffers from a number of inconsistencies. The most prominent is that cities with significant differences in their urban forms may yield the same results, and cities with similarities in their urban forms may yield different results. Neuman's conclusion is that "The little evidence that does exist regarding the sustainability of compact cities is equivocal."¹⁶⁷ A more recent study by Kristin Kjærås has identified some of the same issues, for instance that "the correlation between compact city strategies and achieved sustainability is largely taken for granted in

161 Røe, Per Gunnar, "Iscenesetelser av den Kompakte Byen – Som Visuell Representasjon, Arkitektur og Salgsobjekt," in *Kompakt Byutvikling. Muligheter og Utfordringer*, 48–57.

162 Katie Williams, "Urban Intensification Policies in England: Problems and Contradictions," *Land Use Policy* 16, no. 3 (1999): 172.

163 Elizabeth Burton, "The Compact City: Just or Just Compact?" *Urban Studies* 37, no. 11 (2000): 1987.

164 Both positive and negative outcomes are critically discussed here: Elizabeth Burton, Mike Jencks and Katie Williams, *The Compact City – A Sustainable Urban Form?* (London: Routledge, 1996).

165 Lene Schmidt, *Kompakt By, Bokvalitet og Sosial Bærekraft* (Oslo: NIBR, 2014), 37.

166 Lene Schmidt, "Snipp, Snapp, Snute – Sola er Ute," *Plan* 52, no. 3 (2020): 12–19. [This should be included in the bibliography]

167 Neuman, "The Compact City Fallacy," 11.

public and academic debates.”¹⁶⁸ The paradox prevails, in other words, largely because the authoritative climate narrative creates an “eco-spatial consensus.”¹⁶⁹ A major problem, Kjærås argues, is that the compact city approach is too much concerned with territorial logic and urban form and too little with the environmental and social impact.¹⁷⁰

But there are scholars who conclude very differently. Kostas Mouratidis has recently published a series of articles on neighborhood satisfaction and subjective well-being,¹⁷¹ and a doctoral thesis where he argues that the compact city is not necessarily detrimental to subjective well-being.¹⁷² He has detected synergies between the compact city and human well-being and connections between physical health benefits, social relationships and compact urban forms. Furthermore, his data indicates that compact city residents are generally more satisfied with their neighborhoods than those who live in sprawled neighborhoods.¹⁷³ “The higher the density, the higher the neighborhood satisfaction”,¹⁷⁴ he concludes, in direct opposition to Neuman.

Mouratidis’s work brings nuances to the debate about where people live and why, which is sometimes reduced to simple matters like space versus cost. There is a host of other parameters in between those measurable categories to consider. Where you are in life can have huge impact on your preferences. For people like myself, who lead a fairly conventional family lifestyle centered around the home (Fig. 24), some qualities are more important than others – safety and neighborhood ties, for instance. Such qualities are normally associated with suburbia but,¹⁷⁵ as Mouratidis shows, compact areas can also be livable for families as long as the totality is varied and the immediate environment is appropriate.¹⁷⁶

168 Kjærås, Kristin, “Towards a Relational Conception of the Compact City,” *Urban Studies* 58, no. 6 (2021): 1176.

169 Kjærås, 1177.

170 Kjærås, 1181.

171 Here are two examples by Kostas Mouratidis, “Is Compact City Livable?” and “Compact City, Urban Sprawl, and Subjective Well-being”, *Cities* 92 (September 2019): 261–272.

172 Kostas Mouratidis, “Compact City or Sprawl? The Role of Urban Form in Subjective Well-being” (PhD diss., Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU), 2018).

173 Mouratidis, “Is Compact City Livable?” 2408–2430.

174 Mouratidis, 2018, 2408.

175 Mouratidis, 2018, 2418–2419.

176 Mouratidis, “Compact City or Sprawl?” 141.



Figure 24. My current home in Sinsen Garden City, a ten-flat housing cooperative situated in a former butcher shop and bakery. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland © Even Smith Wergeland.

A Social Utopia?

The question of how to build a more equal society has occupied planners, philosophers, social scientists and others for centuries. Howard’s deep interest in social reform is probably his most innovative contribution to the field. The garden city was among the first urban visions that tried to map every aspect of human life, from the practical to the emotional, from the productive to the recreational. “The broad license that Ebenezer Howard was willing to issue to his ideal community made its unique growth possible”,¹⁷⁷ as Walter L. Creese put it. It is reasonable to claim that all later movements in urbanism, planning and architecture that have concerned themselves with human welfare owe a share to Howard’s groundwork. Howard’s social quest was also equipped with a realistic approach to economy that proved to be transferable to places outside the UK. All the earliest examples of garden city projects in Norway were realized through customized organizational structures, normally a form of private-public cooperation.

The problem, as previously highlighted, is that social equity cannot be achieved through a specific urban form, degree of density or organizational

177 Creese, *The Search for the Environment: The Garden City – Before and After*, 203.

framework. Urban history tells us that it is notoriously difficult to cater for the less fortunate segment of the population regardless of the overall model. That inconsolable fact is precisely what the garden city movement struggled to overcome in practice. The ironic tragedy is that the vision for all in many cases turned out to be rather exclusive. My neighborhood, with its clerical segment origins, is getting more expensive by the year. A residential unit was sold in 2021 for three times the price compared to the previous time it changed hands in 2013.¹⁷⁸ Sinsen Garden City is thus another confirmation of the grim reality of Oslo's housing market.¹⁷⁹

When Oslo's first garden cities were built, the property market had stricter regulations and the public sector took an active role in developing, building and financing housing. Holtet Garden City was realized between 1923 and 1930 through the efforts of a working-class union cooperative.¹⁸⁰ A total of 56 houses were completed at half the price per room compared with Ullevål Garden City.¹⁸¹ According to Michael Hopstock, the initial residents of Holtet Garden City primarily belonged to the working class and the lower-paid clerical segment. But only 8% of those were unskilled workers. Even in this instance, with the best of intentions and financial systems available, the garden city was beyond reach for those it would have benefited the most.¹⁸²

In addition to prevalent geographic and socio-cultural divisions,¹⁸³ two factors seem to have been particularly decisive for why Norwegian garden cities did not reach the working classes – the organizational structure of the cooperatives and the building costs. The story of Ullevål Garden City is interesting in this regard. One had to be a member of the Garden City Ltd., which appealed to people from the western part of the city, who had

178 It should be noted, however, that it was only a ground floor flat with a shared basement (and loft) in 2013. The building was sectioned afterwards, which increased the value of each section.

179 These publications explain the galloping situation: Kim Christian Astrup, "Boligprisutviklingen i Norge – Forventingenes Rolle," in *Boligmarked og Boligpolitikk*, ed. Berit Nordahl (Trondheim: Akademika Forlag, 2012), 39–55; and Hannah Gitmark, *Det Norske Hjem* (Oslo: Res Publica, 2020).

180 Bing and Johnsen, "Innledning: Nye Hjem i Mellomkrigstiden," 21.

181 Hopstock, "Holtet Hageby – En Rød Bydel?" 131.

182 Hopstock, 131–132.

183 This book chapter provides a good overview of the structural inequalities that have defined Oslo as a city historically and today: Jan Eivind Myhre, "Oslos Historie som Delt By," in *Oslo – Ulikhetenes By*, ed. Jørn Ljunggren (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2017), 29–54.

occupations such as lawyer, business manager, grocer, engineer, doctor and teacher – hardly a working-class recruitment base. Then there was a lottery to decide which lucky members would secure a flat. The whole venture then became more expensive than planned, since the building materials, maintenance and operation costs rose beyond the municipality's initial calculations. Cost overruns had to be covered by a 10% increase in the entrance fee and the monthly rent for each tenant. The ownership model later changed from a system of collective ownership in which the debt of each apartment was repaid to the company to individual ownership in which the debt became a personal responsibility for each flat owner.¹⁸⁴ This fragmentation of the collective system enabled the residents to become owners of their own flats – a leap towards the entirely market-driven prices that characterize the socio-economic profile of Oslo's garden cities today.

This is reminiscent of the early reality checks at Letchworth and Welwyn. Howard spoke eagerly about “pro-municipal operation”, but he also warned against too much control from the authorities. The garden city had to be self-supported, he argued, but reality killed the vision: It became too expensive for the designated population.¹⁸⁵ But it remains unclear whether garden cities reinforce or strengthen class divisions to a greater extent than other types of settlements. More studies of the connection between garden cities and other neighborhood typologies are needed in order to be able to draw that conclusion.

In Oslo, the problem of segregation is rooted in the city's history. The alarming thing is that the division has escalated since the dawn of the new millennium.¹⁸⁶ A prime reason for this is the unregulated property market. A high level of density can increase property values in central areas, where “everyone” wants to live, and lower the property prices in peripheral areas, where less people want to live unless they get more space inside and outside. This situation is difficult to amend. If an area

184 Einar Li, *Oslo Havebyselskap Gjennom 50 År* (Oslo: Aktietrykkeriet, 1967), 17–76.

185 See Robert Beevers, *The Garden City Utopia: A Critical Biography of Ebenezer Howard* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 168–188.

186 Jørn Ljunggren and Patrick Lie Andersen, “Vestkant og Østkant, Eller Nye Skillelinjer?” in *Oslo – Ulikhetenes By*, ed. by Jørn Ljunggren, 79.

is expensive already, so will the new homes be.¹⁸⁷ More densification in Sinsen Garden City would probably not make it any more affordable.

The greater problem at stake is that neighborhoods can have a huge impact during adolescence and later in life. The neighborhood effect, as Ingar Brattbakk and Terje Wessel define it, consists of internal factors like social habits, patterns, norms and networks, and external factors like jobs, public institutions, educational arenas and so on. The overall status of a neighborhood compared to others is also decisive. Underappreciated neighborhoods often carry a persistent stigma which, regardless of how they actually function, will brand them as “lowly” in the greater scheme of things. This brings an element of self-deprecation to the area, a feeling of being “stuck”, and it prevents people from wanting to move there. Through such structural conditions, existing divisions are amplified.¹⁸⁸

Compared to Howard’s London of the late 19th century, Oslo has a much higher living standard. But the fundamental injustice in the housing market is still there. Howard’s main mistake was to overestimate the potential of the agrarian economy – land as a source of shared wealth, cooperation and community.¹⁸⁹ His idea was that large areas of land, if organized and operated properly, would lead to an even distribution of resources and a gradual increase in value for the whole collective. Today, in the market-driven economy, land is an asset for the individual who can afford to buy it. What matters is where the land is placed, not the quality of the land itself, and how much money a person is able to invest. This is the flipside of what Howard envisioned.

But it is important to remember that Oslo’s garden cities, and garden cities elsewhere in Norway, did improve the living conditions for a significant number of people when they were new. This demonstrates that Howard’s ideas were not completely at odds with societal realities. Many garden cities were affordable to a large segment of the population and remained within economic reach, even in Oslo, until quite recently.

187 Rolf Barlinthaug, “Boligmarked og Flytting – Betydning for Segregasjon,” in *Oslo – Ulikhetenes By*, 121–144.

188 Ingar Brattbakk and Terje Wessel, “Nabolagets Effekt: Hva er Problematisk med Geografisk Ulikhet?” in *Oslo – Ulikhetenes by*, 339–358.

189 Beevers, *The Garden City Utopia*, 184.

A Garden of Earthly Delights

A consistent trademark of garden cities now and before is the cultivation culture. Sinsen Garden City is a good example of that. In the mid-1930s, a professional gardener, senior gardener Gørtz, was recruited from a nearby horticulture firm to act as a consultant for the residents of Sinsen Garden City. His advice on spraying, pruning, care and planting was hugely appreciated, according to the local newspaper.¹⁹⁰ The aim was to make the local gardens beautiful *and* useful, with special attention to growing food. Those two dimensions, esthetics and utility, run parallel through garden city history.

The garden has a long-standing tradition in modern planning and architecture and has gone through multiple guises over the past centuries, creating an enormous impact on urban life along the way. A prominent example is Frank Lloyd Wright's vision of a living city based on agrarian philosophy. "Of all the underlying forces working toward emancipation of the city dweller, most important is the gradual reawakening of the primitive instincts of the agrarian",¹⁹¹ he wrote in 1958. A few years later, the British Townscape Movement launched a project called Motopia, which was founded on a desire for garden design and road construction in equal measures. Its main architect, Geoffrey A. Jellicoe, called it a fusion of the biological and the mechanical.¹⁹² This is a fine analogy to Sinsen Garden City, where gardens are enveloped by large transport arteries on three sides.

Despite these and numerous other urban visions where the gardener has been a central figure, the profession is seldom credited in the same way as architects and planners. But the time is nigh, argues Graham Livesey, who claims that "The garden, and the act of gardening, provide potential answers to the challenges of contemporary human settlement."¹⁹³ The garden city movement, with its insistence on domestic gardens for each house, is a testament to that potential, as an effort to crossbreed active labor and active gardening. This was evident right from the start, argues

190 "Man er Begeistret over Hagekonsulentordningen i Sinsen Haveby," *Vort Vel*, March 29, 1935, 1.

191 Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City* (New York: Bramhall House, 1958).

192 Geoffrey A. Jellicoe, *Motopia* (London: Studio Books/Longacre Press Ltd., 1961), 11.

193 Graham Livesey, "Assemblage Theory, Gardens and the Legacy of the Early Garden City Movement," *Architectural Research Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2011): 277

Livesey: “The Garden City placed particular emphasis on gardening and the gardener, and on revitalizing an integrated role for farming and the farmer. Therefore, the gardener and the farmer became two vital urban figures in the Garden City Movement, figures not typically associated with urbanization.”¹⁹⁴

The class perspective immediately comes into the picture again. Not everyone gets to be urban agrarians. The urban garden has tended to be a middle- and upper-class domain.¹⁹⁵ Its origins are royal, aristocratic and bourgeois, and relatively few people have been lucky enough to have a garden of their own through urban history. That is precisely why Howard was so insistent on the importance of gardens for everyone – to break with the prevailing class hierarchy. Nowadays, the green agenda is often connected to similar ideas about parks and gardens as common goods.¹⁹⁶ At an overall planning level in Oslo, green values are mostly secured through publicly available recreational spaces like parks. Private green spaces like gardens are generally deprioritized, despite the fact that Oslo is supposed to have a multi-functional approach to nature planning according to its own administrative and political platform. Another prevalent trend is that citizens wish to protect and expand existing green spots, private and public, while private developers are keen to densify without too much commitment in advance to green elements.¹⁹⁷

Such strategic dilemmas are by no means new. When the zoning plan for Sinsen Garden City was put forward in 1929 it was met with resistance from Oslo’s Head of Planning, Harald Hals, on account of its disruptive effect on the belt of green recreation areas in the Master Plan for Oslo of 1929. To Hals, private gardens did not qualify as beneficial for the general public to the same degree as parks. From a property perspective he was right – to enter someone else’s garden is trespassing. But gardens, as

194 Graham Livesey, *Ecologies of the Early Garden City: Essays on Structure, Agency, and Greenspace* (Champaign, Illinois: Common Ground Research Networks, 2019), 87

195 Langeland, “Hage for Hvermann,” 59–61.

196 This is a key theme in this anthology: Mark Luccarelli and Per Gunnar Røe, eds. *Green Oslo: Visions, Planning and Discourse* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

197 Kine Halvorsen Thorén and Inger-Lise Saglie, “Hvordan Ivaretas Synet til Grønnstruktur og Naturmangfold i den Kompakte Byen?” in *Kompakt Byutvikling. Muligheter og utfordringer*, eds. Gro Sandkjær Hanssen, Hege Hofstad and Inger-Lise Saglie, 132–133.

uncovered recently, can have positive effects for everyone as caretakers of urban ecological diversity. “The city as a garden, comprised of gardens, remains a powerful paradigm for the ecological, sustainable city”,¹⁹⁸ argues Livesey. The idea of the garden as integral to a larger urban context was not on the radar during Hals’s reign. His wish was overruled too, since his own municipality was unwilling to secure the open landscape through acquisition. Instead, the Aker politicians responded to the urgent housing issue and approved the plan. Today, the garden city appears more like an extension than an interruption of the nearby Torshov valley.¹⁹⁹

But even if Sinsen Garden City did not ruin Oslo’s park-like character, the decision to build there nevertheless raises the question of balance between human needs and nature conservation. One problem with densification or any form of housing on natural terrain is that it decreases the total amount of green space. As history tells us, whether this is urban housing or cabin developments in Norwegian nature, building activity tends to breed more building activity. The densification in parts of Sinsen Garden City illustrates this. The new residential units house more people by diminishing the gardens. Humans have thus triumphed over nature in ways that are now being questioned by scholars who operate within fields like landscape urbanism, eco-architecture, post-humanism, deep ecology, multi-species studies and environmental humanities.

While there are obvious differences between them, these subdisciplines represent a scholarly effort to disentangle the opposition between human and non-human nature. Humans do not live in nature, we *are* nature, and nature is human, especially since our species have a tremendous impact on the planet on which all life-forms depend.²⁰⁰ As for the garden, it should no longer be regarded as a pre-defined, cultivated once-and-for-all

198 Livesey, *Ecologies of the Early Garden City*, 100.

199 Byantikvaren i Oslo, *Kulturminnegrunnlag for Hovinbyen* (Oslo: Oslo Kommune, 2016), 49.

200 The following titles build on this assumption: Paula Danby, Katherine Dashper and Rebecca Finkel, *Multiple Leisure: Human-Animal Interactions in Leisure Landscapes* (London: Routledge, 2021); Mariano Gomez-Luque and Ghazal Jafari, eds. *Posthuman*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2017); Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2017); and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 1995).

phenomena, but rather be approached as a place of multiplicity and an ongoing process.²⁰¹ Within this mode of thinking, gardens are microhabitats that “can significantly alter the environmental conditions.”²⁰² They are, to put it bombastically, indispensable in the ongoing battle to prevent planetary collapse.

It may seem futile to save the planet from one’s own backyard, but that perspective is now appearing in new literature on how to transform garden utopias into real practices. “When well and thoughtfully done, the gardener’s practice of care extends to the soil, the insects, the birds, the mice and groundhogs, and beyond that to the self, the family, the neighborhood, the community, and the planet,”²⁰³ writes Naomi Jacobs, who places the garden at the center of an alternative future. She is supported in her ambitious claims by the ecologist Douglas W. Tallamy, whose main concern is how to realize ecological utopia in actual gardens.²⁰⁴ He is critical towards suburbanization *and* densification on the grounds that both forms of development, if badly performed, create an absence of life. “The message that diversity is good for our ecosystems and therefore good for humans has been both poorly delivered and poorly received,”²⁰⁵ he argues, and points to the disappearance of insects, birds and unruly vegetation from a growing number of American landscapes. The problem, he claims, is that Western culture has privileged a landscape paradigm that favors form over function and control over natural growth, which is a fairly paradoxical way to treat nature. If we detect one or two garden intruders, either in the form of flora or fauna or both, we typically tend to eliminate everything, regardless of their actual contribution, which may be positive.²⁰⁶

201 Naomi Jacobs, “Consuming Beauty: The Urban Garden as Ambiguous Utopia,” in *Earth Perfect. Nature, Utopia and the Garden*, eds. Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs, 164.

202 Weaner, *Garden Revolution: How Our Landscapes Can Be a Source of Environmental Change*, 61.

203 Jacobs, “Consuming Beauty: The Urban Garden as Ambiguous Utopia,” 156.

204 Douglas W. Tallamy, “Achieving Ecological Utopia in the Garden,” in *Earth Perfect. Nature, Utopia and the Garden*, 286–301.

205 Tallamy, 289.

206 Tallamy, 294–298.

When Sinsen Garden City called upon the services of senior gardener Gørtz, he offered advice on how to exterminate “alien” insects and plants. Synthetic fertilizer was another favorite of his. It was regarded at the time as the future of gardening. Today it is commonly known that synthetic fertilizer has severe environmental consequences in both production terms and agricultural practice. Times change and so does the notion of what is bad or good, obsolete or future-oriented. Livesey refers to the old ways as a militaristic “battle against agents of destruction.”²⁰⁷ The initial horticulture of Sinsen Garden City is bound to be problematic from the perspective of the contemporary eco-avantgarde, which represents a wave of renewed, critical interest in the garden in the 21st century. A major point is to move away from the pragmatic maintenance approach and embrace the garden as a complex horticultural space in need of continuously evolving caretaking.

Another contemporary tendency is to abandon the idea of cultivation and embrace the idea of wilderness. The wild garden, free from human intervention, is characterized by qualities normally associated with urban wildscapes,²⁰⁸ places of vegetation that have evolved over time without any planning or design at sites like vacant lots, cemeteries, landfills, industrial wastelands and infrastructural islands. The irony, since we live in a post-wild world, especially in the cities, is that plant communities that evoke nature have to be designed by humans before they can become “authentic” and “natural” nature.²⁰⁹ It is highly unlikely, in any case, that the residents of Sinsen Garden City will allow their gardens to roam as freely as the most progressive ideals suggest. But the current generation is probably more sympathetic towards the contemporary ecological approach than the extermination strategy of the past, due to the growing awareness about the value of gardens in relation to climate issues.

What are we to make of the garden city legacy in light of such reforming perspectives on gardens and the environment? “Although not an

207 Livesey, *Ecologies of the Early Garden City*, 95.

208 Anna Jorgensen and Richard Keenan, *Urban Wildscapes* (London: Routledge, 2012).

209 Thomas Rainer and Claudia West, *Planting in a Post-wild World: Designing Plant Communities that Evoke Nature* (Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 2015).

environmentalist by today's standards, Howard comprehended the fundamental relationship between nature and society",²¹⁰ writes Robert F. Young, who has published extensively on sustainable planning and urban ecosystems in recent years. Howard himself wrote that "The country must invade the city."²¹¹ Had he been active today, the phrase could well have been "The garden must invade the parking lot". There is a quest these days to convert "hard", human-made surfaces to "soft" nature again. Urban gardening on balconies, rooftops and pavements is part of that action, as are gardens and allotments. If we continue to pack every surface with human-made, artificial materials, the natural ecosystem will suffer. Water management alone is a huge problem at a time when flooding is becoming more and more usual in cities. A green roof has little effect in that regard, since the water will eventually pour onto the ground. Deep soil on natural terrain is necessary to secure enough drainage – the city needs proper gardens, in other words. It is with this impact in mind that Livesey considers the garden city as an antidote to hard-surface urbanism and a potent reminder of alternate forms of urban management: "The notion, put forward by the early Garden City movement, that the city could become a garden and a community of gardeners, continues to be a model for thinking about the creation and maintenance of ecologies inhabited by humans."²¹²

Given the urgency of the climate crisis, I would suggest that Howard's agrarian perspective on city life has re-emerged with a vengeance. In the years to come, we must tackle all forms of human wastefulness. As Young puts it: "The collapse of our civilization is occurring before our eyes. While our material wealth continues to expand, the ecological systems upon which it is founded are being rapidly cut away."²¹³ With this in mind, I would argue that the most critical heritage value in Sinsen Garden City is the white winter landscape (Fig. 25), as an extension to the green discourse. Green qualities in the city tend to be treated as spring, summer

210 Robert F. Young, "Green Cities and the Urban Future," in *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, eds. Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 202.

211 Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, 156.

212 Livesey, *Ecologies of the Early Garden City*, 152.

213 Young, "Green Cities and the Urban Future," 221.



Figure 25. Winter-time action in Sinsenjordet, January 2022. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.
© Even Smith Wergeland.

and fall phenomena. Livesey refers to the “dormant winter months” when gardeners relax, celebrate their past achievements and plan the next season.²¹⁴ While there is no gardening, obviously, the green spaces in Oslo are anything but dormant during winter. They are more like an explosion of outdoor activities, made possible by snow and ice. In Sinsen Garden City, both private and public green spaces erupt into life when snowfall occurs. Snowmen, snow lanterns and home-made igloos appear in the gardens, and people congregate in the nearby park for skiing, sliding and snowball fights. However, even in a winter city like Oslo, these aspects of the garden city are rarely mentioned in ongoing debates about urban life quality.

On the gloomy side of things – and hence the sense of urgency – the winter season in Oslo is perhaps the best indicator of the climate crisis. Oslo prides itself on being a world-class skiing city but snow has become a rarer

²¹⁴ Livesey, *Ecologies of the Early Garden City*, 90.

commodity in recent years. Every winter now comes with reports about winter sports organizations that are pumping out artificial snow “to save the winter,” apparently without any sense of irony or deeper understanding of what this implies. The sinister reality is that winter is slowly fading away and that overconsumption of electricity, which is required to produce snow, only helps to aggravate the situation. “Norway has run out of snow, so they’re making it artificially instead” was the headline of a recent Euronews feature on the topic. The lack of snow in Oslo was singled out as particularly symbolic of the widespread reluctance to change course and downscale the consumer culture that contributes to accelerating climate change.²¹⁵

The consumption of existing buildings and landscapes is a major part of that issue. To improve the situation, we have to take better care of the buildings we already have. Existing buildings should be maintained, not demolished, even if they are not regarded as cultural heritage at the time when the decision is made. The timber architecture of Sinsen Garden City is well suited to a form of reuse culture founded on endurance and preservation.²¹⁶ This radical view of reuse is currently being promoted under the umbrella of circular heritage, a melting pot of existing heritage practices like adaptive reuse, sustainable preservation, and circular principles from fields like economy and design.²¹⁷ The essence, in brief terms, is to foster a management system where all forms of waste are minimized through continuous use of resources. This involves a loop instead of a linear growth model, where every existing item is valuable by default.²¹⁸ From this point of view, Sinsen Garden City and the other Norwegian garden cities are indisputable ingredients in a sustainable future as long as they are useful, repairable and appreciated.

215 Maeve Campbell, “Norway Has Run Out of Snow, So They’re Making it Artificially Instead,” Euronews.com, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/green/2020/01/24/norway-has-run-out-of-snow-so-they-re-making-it-artificially-instead>.

216 Sample, *Maintenance Architecture*.

217 See Bie Plevoets and Koenraad van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases from an Emerging Discipline* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019); Duncan Baker-Brown, *The Reuse Atlas. A Designer’s Guide Towards a Circular Economy* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2017); and Amalia Leifeste and Barry L. Stiefel, *Sustainable Heritage. Merging Environmental Conservation and Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

218 For further input, see Catherine Weetman, *A Circular Economy Handbook* (London: Kogan Page Ltd., 2020); and Peter Lacy, Jessica Long and Wesley Spindler, *The Circular Economy Handbook*.

Concluding Remarks

The history of the Norwegian garden cities demonstrates that the garden city concept was well suited for exportation to completely different socio-economic, cultural and geographical contexts than Howard's starting point. The broad international scope indicates that the concept was relevant, flexible and full of desirable qualities at the time of its origin. The Norwegian garden cities were a significant contribution to the development of a modern Norwegian housing tradition, rooted in both vernacular and contemporary architectural ideas. From the mountains to the lowlands, from the countryside to the urban fringe, the formula worked. The settlements were, to a large degree, successful in terms of securing shelter, a home for families who needed it at the time. For those who gained access, their standard of living undoubtedly improved, despite some deficiencies both architecturally, technically and economically during the early stages. As Hopstock writes about the legacy of Holtet Garden City: "The garden cities were probably the most effective tool to provide a high housing standard and increased life quality for common people. We can only lament that we did not continue to trust such solutions in the decades that followed."²¹⁹

But the initial success and remarkable flexibility of the concept cannot disguise the fact that the garden city movement failed in its attempt to deliver a social revolution of the proportions that Howard envisioned. The high-flying ideas of equality were impossible to implement in practice, even in an egalitarian society like Norway. This has partly to do with miscalculations in the garden city concept, and partly with the devastating truth that city life is fundamentally unfair from the outset. Sinsen Garden City is as good an example as any of that fact. When I look out

219 Translated from: "Antagelig var havebyene det mest effektive redskap til å gi vanlige folk en høy boligstandard og økt livskvalitet. Vi kan bare beklage at vi i tiårene som fulgte ikke satset mer på denne boligformen." In Hopstock, "Holtet Hageby – En Rød Bydel?", 140.

the window, I see members of the well-to-do middle-class with properties of galloping economic value. My neighbors can gaze back at me and point out that a flat of this size now costs more than an entire single-family house 30 years ago. We are the fortunate ones who have followed Oslo's property market upstream. Those who currently stand where I did upon my arrival in Oslo in 2009 – with a temporary job and a low annual income – will probably never get the same chance unless something dramatic happens to the national economy.

On a more positive note, Sinsen Garden City shows that a historical neighborhood can serve a purpose – and grow in quality – within a larger urban territory. Without the garden spots and the local park, the totality of green spaces would have been significantly lower in the wider area. The garden city has profited from the higher degree of mixed land use provided by Løren and the other surrounding neighborhoods. This means that Sinsen Garden City, which was never self-sufficient, feels more city-like than ever. Residents from different neighborhoods interact through institutions like schools and kindergartens, services like cafes and restaurants, and recreational activities like sport and park life. Such synergies were never part of Howard's garden city vision, but they have occurred nonetheless. As the densification of the area continues in the years to come, more people will gain access to a convenient part of Oslo at the crossroads of the old and the new city.

Although statistics indicate that new flats do not necessarily cool down the prices, one could perhaps hope that these areas between Oslo's inner and outer zone will eventually create a new dynamic in the property market. Some of the first-generation families who occupy the family-oriented apartment complexes will presumably move if they outgrow their flats, thus allowing others to take over. It has to be noted as well that Sinsen Garden City already has a limited assortment of smaller flats, including the ten flats located in the building where my family lives. Only one of the residents who were living here when we arrived in 2017 still remains. This can be a problem for a small housing association – the lack of continuity makes it tricky to plan long-term investments – but it provides some welcome circulation in the market.

From an architectural point of view, a garden city structure like Sinsen adds variation and traditional qualities to an area otherwise dominated by apartment blocks from the 21st century. This underestimated aspect of historical architecture may be called *esthetic sustainability*—the prevailing visual attraction of building types that could not have been built today due to legal restrictions and a standardized construction industry. I imagine that many people who pass through Sinsen Garden City appreciate the heritage, even if they are unable to place it historically and stylistically. Moreover, the legacy of timber is a potential asset from an ecological point of view. The environmental ethics of the building industry depend upon the increased use of wood in the future and more timber production.²²⁰ They also depend upon the ability to take good care of what is already here. Perhaps it is time to trust such solutions again in the decades to come, to paraphrase Hopstock?

Norwegian property developers certainly seem to think so. The garden city tag is now being used frequently in new housing projects: Sandefjord Garden City [*Sandefjord Hageby*], Lørenskog Garden City [*Lørenskog Hageby*], Skråtorp Garden City [*Skråtorp Hageby*] and Proffen Garden City [*Proffen Hageby*] to mention only a few examples. Many of these are mixtures of relatively dense apartment block structures with green facilities like allotments available for self-cultivation. What they lack, more often than not, is a holistic plan for mixed land use. Much like Harald Hals feared in the 1920s, the garden city label seems to work better for residential marketing purposes than complex planning purposes. But the garden city formula has also made a more nuanced comeback according to Eugenie L. Birch, who has found that the biggest difference between Howard's vision and recent interpretations is that Howard tried to deal with population congestion through decentralization, while today's planners are trying to fix the inner city through garden city principles.²²¹ William Fulton draws a similar conclusion in his study of the garden

220 Sven Meyer, *The Future Usage of Wood. Timber as a Sustainable Material in Construction* (Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2019).

221 Eugenie L. Birch, "Five Generations of the Garden City: Tracing Howard's Legacy in Twentieth-Century Residential Planning," in *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, eds. Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler, 199–200.

city-inspired New Urbanism movement of the 1980s and 90s, which renewed the focus on neighborhood units and the town center as the heart of the civic realm.²²² It is not necessarily a question of “downtown or suburbia” anymore. Garden city principles can be applied anywhere, either in the form of new garden city-inspired neighborhoods or by preserving the existing ones.

It has probably never been particularly realistic, however, for the garden city model to carry an entire urban development on its own. A city needs more variation and diversity to appeal to different kinds of inhabitants. That is why the most interesting thing about garden city neighborhoods is how they intertwine with the other parts of the city. Their strategic purpose, then and now, has always mattered the most. When Sinsen Garden City was established, it was a matter of expanding the urban zone by utilizing a rural piece of land. A garden city approach was an amenable compromise between two colliding contexts in those days. Today it represents a much-needed green pocket within a local area characterized by two decades of densification. As long as it has a relevant role to play, argue Stern, Fishman and Tilove, it does not have to be discarded: “Planned as part of the metropolitan city, the garden suburb is the best template yet devised to achieve a habitable earthly paradise... The garden suburb may well hold the key to the future of our cities.”²²³

Another way of thinking about it, as Richard Sennett explained when I interviewed him in 2019, is that existing historical structures provide an opportunity to reflect critically about what and how we build today. The contemporary value of relevant history lessons is also central in Livesey’s *Ecologies of the Early Garden City Movement*. The past offers alternative architectural expressions and urban habits that we can learn from, not by trying to replicate them but by reinterpreting their best qualities. Cities were not necessarily better before – indeed, in Howard’s days, they could be pretty miserable – and it is important to avoid nostalgia, warns

222 William Fulton, “The Garden Suburb and the New Urbanism,” in *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, 165–169.

223 Stern, Fishman and Tilove, *Paradise Planned*, 961.

Sennett.²²⁴ But it is equally important not to overestimate the prevailing urban development ideology. There are advantages and disadvantages to Løren,²²⁵ which has been developed in accordance with compact urban development principles.

The most politically correct aspect of Sinsen Garden City in the early days was the strong promotion of public transport. It must have been perceived as far from the center in those days – it was even outside the city border – but Olaf Løken’s advertisements insisted on the convenience of the upcoming infrastructure. This was a couple of decades before the explosion in car ownership in Oslo, which probably explains why cars were never mentioned in the advertisements, but it is still striking how similar the rhetoric is to contemporary advertisements for new areas in Oslo. Rail-based transport has been a strong component in the history of the garden city in Oslo, especially in regard to the second generation. This is relevant simply because public transport is so fundamental in theories about urban sustainability. The frequency of public transport use is more important than the density of the residential structure. Suburban concentration around nodes in the public transport system may increase the public transport share, as highlighted by Røe and Saglie in a study of two Norwegian “minicities in suburbia,” Asker and Sandvika. Though not directly comparable to Sinsen Garden City due to their differing sizes and general characteristics, there are some transferable findings. One is that minicities may reduce the need to travel to the main center, which Røe and Saglie call “the substitution hypothesis.”²²⁶ This is similar to our everyday independence from downtown Oslo. The other is what they refer to as “the long-term resilience argument,”²²⁷ which regards the capacity to adapt with the times. Sinsen Garden City may not have changed a lot over the years but the surrounding area certainly has. The garden city contains

224 Richard Sennett, “Historie, Migrasjon og Musikk: Ein Samtale med Richard Sennett,” interview by Even Smith Wergeland, *Sosiologen.no*, September 21, 2019, <https://sosiologen.no/intervju/historie-migrasjon-og-musikk-ein-samtale-med-richard-sennett/>.

225 As detailed in this report: Kenneth Dahlgren, Aga Skorupka and Gro Sandkjær Hansen, *Lærdom fra Løren. En Tverrfaglig Evaluering av Utviklingen fra 2002 til 2019* (Oslo: Selvaag Bolig, Rodeo Arkitekter and OsloMet, 2019).

226 Per Gunnar Røe and Inger-Lise Saglie, “Minicities in Suburbia – A Model for Urban Sustainability?” *Form Akademisk* 4, no. 2 (2011): 38–58.

227 Røe and Saglie, 54.

two highly regarded schools, a cherished park, sports facilities and other functions that benefit the entire area. As long as the garden city continues to evolve with its surroundings and offer qualities that the city needs, its existence seems justifiable. And while it is impossible to make a general conclusion, since the answer is always influenced by the particular contextual circumstances, it nevertheless seems reasonable to claim that the garden city principle represents a string of ingredients that will be needed in the future city too.

About the Author

Even Smith Wergeland is an art historian whose research and teaching is based in the fields of architectural history, planning history and architectural heritage. He has published work on a variety of themes within these fields, including sports architecture, urban mobility, heritage management and architectural preservation, often combining historical research with contemporary perspectives on the subject matter in question. Wergeland is an associate professor at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design in Norway.

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