



The First Garden City? Environment and utopianism in an Edwardian institution for the insane poor



Gillian Allmond

School of Natural and Built Environment, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland, UK

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ABSTRACT

At Kingseat Asylum near Aberdeen, in 1901–1904, asylum authorities constructed an asylum which appears to resemble Ebenezer Howard's schematic diagram of a garden city 'ward'. Using theories of the relationship between spatial rationalities and governmentality, this paper asks whether Howard's garden city could plausibly have been a model for the Kingseat Asylum layout. The historiographical orthodoxy, which claims that late nineteenth-century asylums were little more than 'warehouses' to sequester the unwanted, is problematized and the existence is postulated of a distinct Scottish asylum culture which was alarmed by the tendency to asylum growth, overcrowding and disease in England and elsewhere. Garden city reformers and asylum builders faced similar problems in terms of overcrowding and disease, and were both concerned about the 'aggregation' of the poor and their consequent loss of individuality. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Scottish asylum builders, in particular, rejected the increasingly large monolithic style of asylum in favour of dispersed 'village' style settlements. Aberdeen asylum authorities may have sought to access the symbolic resonance of the garden city layout and its utopian qualities as a 'marriage' of town and country, health and industry, variety and uniformity. The garden city asylum also points to a spectrum of opinion relating to the therapeutic role of environment in relation to mental illness and suggests that 'hard hereditary' approaches were less influential, at least in Scotland, than is sometimes claimed.

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The ideal of the garden city, as advanced by Ebenezer Howard in the last decade of the nineteenth century, was immediately recognised by his contemporaries as inspirational, while often simultaneously being heavily criticised for its perceived utopianism. Typical were the comments of an early reviewer in *The Scotsman*, that the garden city 'no doubt seems a paradise on paper but ... also seems too good a residential quarter ever to be practically realisable'.¹ Howard's persistence was nonetheless formidable and he was relatively rapidly able to muster enough support to realise a version of his vision at Letchworth. The criticisms of early doubters were rapidly forgotten as garden cities, garden suburbs and garden villages, inspired by Howard, were not only built in the U.K., U.S. and western Europe, but, as recent scholarship has shown, across the world wherever colonial influence made itself felt, in South America, Africa and the Middle

and Far East.² Indeed, Howard's vision retains its utopian resonance into the present and the garden city concept continues to be invoked as a 'practical idealist' solution to the problems of unfettered urban expansion.³

Another nineteenth-century project with its roots in utopian ideals, the asylum for the insane, has not fared so well. The gradual abandonment of the asylum project in the second half of the twentieth century has been accompanied by a historiography which paints a thoroughly dystopian picture of the accumulation of

² R.A.M. Stern, D. Fishman and J. Tilove, *Paradise Planned: The Garden Suburb and the Modern City*, New York, 2013.

³ For example, the 2014 Wolfson Economics prize asked for a plan for 'a new garden city which is visionary, economically viable and popular'. The winning entry closely referenced Howard, using his 'snowflake' diagram of the Social City to propose a network of 'urban extensions' to an existing town, D. Rudlin and N. Falk, *Uxcester Garden City*, Manchester, 2014. Although government plans for new garden cities have not materialised, fourteen garden villages are to be built across England with larger garden towns proposed for Buckinghamshire, Somerset and the Essex-Hertfordshire border, *The Guardian*, 2nd January 2017.

E-mail address: Gallmond01@qub.ac.uk.

¹ *The Scotsman*, 12th October 1898.

'chronic' cases in ever larger institutions. Andrew Scull appropriated the terms 'warehouses' and 'museums of madness' to describe the vast buildings which were used to segregate society's unwanted by the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ Although the asylum project had begun with high hopes, it is Scull's contention, followed by the majority of scholars of madness, that by the turn of the century therapeutic pessimism prevailed, based on the Morelian theory of degeneration and a resurgence of interest in Larmarckian evolution.⁵ According to this reading of medical discourses, hereditary weakness was caused by the poor habits and lax morals of the degenerate; mental illness was the ultimate penalty for breaking moral and hygienic laws. Society's duty was, therefore, simply to sequester the insane to prevent reproduction of the 'unfit' in asylums built as quickly and as cheaply as decorum would allow.⁶

This paper will contend that although the asylum is readily acknowledged as a 'governable space', this is often seen, in Foucauldian terms, in relation to segregation and exclusion of various kinds and/or panoptic surveillance, models which are insufficient to account for all material and spatial practices in relation to asylum provision.⁷ The garden city, by contrast, has seldom been viewed as constituting subjects through a particular spatial organisation. However, it will be argued here that, in the early twentieth century, both the asylum and the garden city can be seen in terms of governmentality, with spatial arrangements and environmental qualities, elaborated through discourses of health, freedom and individuality, acting to produce social effects.⁸ Previous scholarship has noted both that the garden city movement was influenced by contemporary medical discourses and that the 'benevolent social and economic engineering' represented by garden cities was paralleled by the 'colony' type of institution, the most well-known example being the epileptic colony at Ewell (opened in 1904).⁹ This paper will postulate the existence of a distinct Scottish asylum culture in which moral, mental and physical health was strongly linked to the qualities of environments by Scottish asylum authorities who were alarmed by the tendency to asylum growth, overcrowding and disease in England and elsewhere. It will be suggested that Ebenezer Howard's garden city, which sought to address the dangers of degeneration, overcrowding and disease represented by the urban slums, is a possible source for the layout of the asylum at Kingseat, outside Aberdeen, which strongly resembles Howard's garden city template, a resemblance which has not previously been identified in the years since its construction.¹⁰

If inspired by Howard, the asylum (opened in 1904) may have been the earliest complete expression of his vision, comfortably pre-dating Letchworth, which is usually known as the First Garden City.¹¹ This paper will show that an idealised community combining the advantages of town and country may have had much to commend it to asylum authorities who were addressing problems related to health, both physical and mental, similar to those that the garden city sought to confront. It will be argued that it is plausible for asylum authorities to have been attracted to the utopian elements of Howard's vision as they related to health and to have attempted to access them through the close reproduction of his diagrammatic forms, although other potential sources of inspiration for the asylum at Kingseat will also be explored. Using Margot Huxley's notion of spatial rationalities, it will be further argued that both layouts order 'healthy bodies and moral behaviours', a 'vitalist' discourse which sought to create 'a generalized evolutionary environment through which humanity might harness non-material forces leading to higher stages of development'.¹²

Ebenezer Howard's Garden City

By the time of the publication of *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in early October 1898 Ebenezer Howard had presented his vision in public on numerous occasions and had arrived at a conception of the garden city which was informed by a variety of concerns, chiefly aesthetic, sanitary and socio-economic. Although a large portion of the book was devoted to discussion of the economics of funding his network of cities through the recovery of the 'unearned increment' resulting from rising land prices through 'rate-rent', far more influential for future planned settlements was Howard's spatial and aesthetic concept of the city, with low density housing situated within garden plots, the city itself characterised by plentiful open, green spaces, rationally planned so that public buildings, housing, shopping and factories occupied clear zones in an environment of the highest quality.¹³

In the first edition of his book, colour illustrations, drawn by Howard himself, presented a series of geometrical diagrams for his network of 'slumless, smokeless cities', that resemble somewhat the keys and levers of the typewriters that were his other obsession.¹⁴ He asks the reader to imagine a 'shape', proportioned mathematically, with a town of a thousand acres at the centre of an estate of six thousand acres. Garden City, with a population of thirty thousand, was to be circular in form, and 'six magnificent boulevards – each 120 feet wide – traverse the city from centre to circumference, dividing it into six equal parts or wards' (Fig. 1). In the centre was to be a circular garden of five and a half acres in extent, surrounded by public buildings, each in its 'own ample grounds'. A public park of

⁴ A.T. Scull, *Museums of Madness: The Social Organization of Insanity in Nineteenth-Century England*, London, 1979.

⁵ A.T. Scull, *Madness in Civilization: A Cultural History of Insanity from the Bible to Freud, from the Madhouse to Modern Medicine*, London, 2015, 243–246.

⁶ Scull, *Museums of Madness*, 277–279.

⁷ H. Parr, *Mental Health and Social Space: Towards Inclusionary Geographies*, Oxford, 2008, 13–14.

⁸ M. Huxley, Spatial rationalities: order, environment, evolution and government, *Social and Cultural Geography* 7 (2006) 771–787; N. Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge, 1999, 31–40.

⁹ C. Hickman, *Therapeutic Landscapes: A History of English Hospital Gardens Since 1800*, Manchester, 2013; S. Rutherford, *The landscapes of public lunatic asylums in England, 1808–1914*, unpublished PhD thesis, De Monfort University, 2003.

¹⁰ See H. Richardson, A continental solution to the planning of lunatic asylums 1900–1940, in: J. Frew and D. Jones (Eds), *Proceedings of a Symposium held at the University, St Andrews May 19th, 1990*, St Andrews, 1991, 67–79; E.C. Halliday, *The hospitalisation of the Scottish asylum 1880–1914*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 2003; A. Darragh, *Prison or palace? Haven or hell? An architectural and social study of the development of public lunatic asylums in Scotland, 1781–1930*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 2011 and K.A. Ross, *The locational history of Scotland's district lunatic asylums, 1857–1913*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2014 for previous discussion of Kingseat, although none of these writers alludes to the garden city as an influence.

¹¹ Aberdeen City District Lunacy Board Minutes 19th June 1904, Aberdeen Central Library, Lo 363.2. Although Letchworth is often dated to 1903 no building work was commenced until the summer of 1904. The First Garden City Company Ltd was registered on 1st September 1903 and Parker and Unwin's layout for Letchworth Garden City was issued as 'the company's plan' on 11th February 1904, following a survey of the site in the winter of 1903. See M. Miller, *Letchworth Garden City: an architectural view*, in: J. Onslow et al., *Garden Cities and New Towns*, Hertford, 1990, 48–87. Development of the estate began a few months later, when infrastructure such as roads, waterworks and sewerage were constructed, fifty plots were let and the first houses were started, C.B. Purdom, *The Garden City: A Study in the Development of a Modern Town*, Letchworth, 1913, 45–46.

¹² Huxley, *Spatial rationalities*.

¹³ P. Hall and C. Ward, *Sociable Cities: The 21st-Century Reinvention of the Garden City*, Abingdon, 2014, 29–35.

¹⁴ Howard hoped to finance the building of garden cities by a patented device for variable spacing on typewriters, which was unfortunately rejected by manufacturers, see F.J. Osborn, Sir Ebenezer Howard: the evolution of his ideas, *The Town Planning Review* 21 (1950) 221–235.

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