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A GARDEN CITY SYSTEM FOR 21ST CENTURY CHINA?

AN OPPORTUNITY TO REALISE THE ORIGINAL VISION FOR SUSTAINABLE TOWN PLANNING

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Imagine a new town that is not just spacious and green, with tree-lined lanes, garden, allotments, green belt around it, clean and healthy, but a human settlement that aims at a perfect harmony of town and countryside. Neither urban nor rural, but a mixture of both, balancing agriculture with city life, supported not just by design but importantly also in terms of social, economic and administrative structures.

Imagine a new town of limited size with a commitment to developing a community spirit. A commitment not just in words and social action but equally in a legal, administrative, financial sense with the revenue of the land continuously reinvested in the quality of life for the community itself, to ensure long-term prosperity and social sustainability.

Imagine such a new town - the Garden City as defined more than a century ago - and multiply it, as a system of garden cities, linked by rail and road. This was the original vision of Ebenezer Howard. A system he called the Social City and which was to offer an alternative to the sprawling metropolis.

The Social City was never built. And though many cities have claimed the title of Garden City none have been able to implement the original concept, except possibly the first Garden Cities, Letchworth and Welwyn, just outside London. Letchworth Garden City has been in existence now for more than 100 years and probably comes closest to the original Garden City concept. Hence this town offers a very valuable experience about whether the idea can stand the test of time.

But otherwise, even though so far no Social City or even a Garden City along the lines of the original blueprint has been created, of course the vision has inspired and set benchmarks to which many towns and cities have aspired and still aspire. In most cases the greatest influence has been on design - green spaces, detached houses - very rarely has the Garden City included the social, economic and administrative dimensions, not to mention the challenge to see the Garden City as part of a bigger system, the Social City.

One can brush aside the Garden City in its original concept as a utopian vision, a dream that cannot be realised. It is true that the perfect Garden City probably will never be built, but having lived now for more than ten years in the prototype Garden City, Letchworth, I recognise the Garden City as a reality, not an imaginary paradise. I can see the strength of the original concept and I can imagine how a system of similar cities would offer a very attractive, very real alternative to the dominance of ever expanding megacities, which in fast urbanising societies put such stress on the social and environmental dimensions. When it comes to sustainability the Garden City and the Social City as a system offer a sensible alternative, bringing harmony to urban and rural activity and communities and seeding long-term prosperity and sustainable economic growth in much wider regions.

So here then the question: Is it possible, maybe even desirable, to create here in China, in the 21st century a system of Garden Cities in the spirit of the original concept as described by Howard?

I ask the question, but it is not my role to supply the answer. That answer needs to come from those who will plan the future of Chinese cities. In other words, the reply needs to come from you who are present here. Not just you collectively, but also you individually. After all, Ebenezer Howard was just one man, uneducated, simple background, not rich, not well-connected. Just one small person with a great vision.

But even a positive answer will not consist of a simple 'yes'. The original Garden City concept requires careful re-interpretation for time and place. A full century has passed since Howard wrote his book. His vision could not consider the impact of cars, modern telecommunications, the role of education, pollution, energy shortage, growth of population. Though the vision basically remains the same and the objectives remain similar, a 21st century concept will have to incorporate the demands of a new century. It also will need to accept the economic realities of today. For instance when it comes to the marriage of town and countryside, Howard assumed a 50/50 mixture. Is that still the right balance? Maybe not. And there is the demographic reality. Howard lived in a time when a community of 30,000 made a big difference and a system of ten towns would make a very big difference to urbanisation. Though it is important to stay faithful to the original idea of community building, the demographic reality of the 21st century probably forces us to reconsider these numbers, yet without destroying the original concept.

Furthermore, the original concept needs to be adjusted for location. When trying to create a Garden City for the 21st century in for instance Japan, one needs to work within the very demanding legal and administrative constraints of that country. One has to accept the reality of very high land prices and building costs, which would seem to make it almost impossible to create very large-scale Garden City projects, not to mention a Garden City system. Very different will be the opportunities in a country where

land, both for rural and urban purpose, is available in large quantity, at reasonable price and the legal framework favourable for large-scale development.

Re-interpretation of the original concept will require a study of the original concept: Howard's book and also maybe prototype settlements like Letchworth. There are opportunities to do so, especially for those who have advanced in their career. One can for instance apply for the research fellowship offered jointly by the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation and the University of Westminster (www.lgchf.com/fellowship)

Re-interpretation of the original Garden City concept will require a respect for the spirit rather than the letter of the original concept. Dairy farms might have to become paddy fields, single family cottage might need to become multi-generation dwellings, and a network of single garden cities might be transformed into a network of 20+ clusters of three garden cities each, representing 2 million or so inhabitants. You, who are much more creative and skilful than I, will be able to generate a variation to the original concept which is feasibility and desirable for a 21st century China, yet still stays faithful to that original vision. And importantly that new concept will not just be a plan for the physical outline but will still have that holistic approach of bringing design, legal-administrative, social and economic dimensions together, with each dimension reinforcing the other. This admittedly is a challenge only for the most gifted or for teams of talent.

One of the most popular reinterpretations of the original Garden City concept in the 20th century has been the Garden Suburb, i.e. an extension of a major city which resembles in style the original Garden Cities and might in administration or social outlook have incorporated some of the original features. It would be unfair to refer to the Garden Suburb as a watered-down or even failed reinterpretation. Ebenezer Howard himself was pragmatic enough to appreciate the positive impact his ideas have had on the development and redevelopment of major cities like London. Though the Garden City and especially the Garden City system (Social City) clearly is in essence an alternative to metropolitan development, it does not mean that the concept is entirely without relevance for big cities. In his book, Howard predicts the positive impact he expects the new Garden Cities will have on improving living conditions in particularly London, the city he for obvious reason focussed on. And one could draw a similar line with the large scale New Town development in post-war England, even though these New Towns did not aspire to be true Garden Cities other maybe than in having a pleasant, spacious, green living environment.

All these historical examples offer valuable experiences, possibly helpful lessons, yet if one wants to attempt the creation of a Garden City or better still a system of Garden Cities in contemporary China, reinterpretation will require the highest level of originality, innovation, vision and probably even courage and perseverance. But the result would be unique in the world. It could offer a new blue print for modern day urbanisation in practice. It would establish probably the most ambitious model for sustainable town planning. But most importantly, this opportunity could offer large numbers of people high quality living conditions for many generations to come, whilst making a big contribution to a more harmonious economic and social development of the nation.

A reinvented form of town planning offering sustainable social and economic development in a harmonious way - that is an exciting challenge. Hence the question I posed at the start of this speech: Is it possible, maybe even desirable, to create here in China, in the 21st century, a system of Garden Cities in the spirit of the original concept? What my colleagues from Britain, Japan and Australia can do at this conference is:

- inform you about the original Garden City concept and the 'spirit' of the original idea
- share experiences with reinterpretations of the Garden City over the last century
- share outcomes of previous conferences which discussed the factors that seem important for a reinterpretation of the concept for the 21st century
- present as a case-study the successes but also failures of the prototype Garden City, Letchworth, over 100+ years
- consider on-going work here in Asia with the creation of Garden City-type of sustainable urbanisation

May all this offer you useful knowledge and be a source of inspiration.