

A FURTHER CRITICISM OF THE GARDEN CITY MOVEMENT.

In the July number of this journal I ventured upon a brief criticism of the Garden City Movement, and as that criticism has been the subject of some comment, I have been permitted, by the courtesy of the editor, to pursue the matter a little further. The main counts of the indictment of garden cities were that the type of development they represent does not lead to beauty, convenience, or economy. It is destructive of beauty for two reasons. In the first place, it leads to a desecration of the country-side, with the result that fewer and fewer people will be able to take delight in the charms of nature; secondly, the houses which have hitherto been erected in garden suburbs and villages are quite unfitted to be seen in congregation, for their many hips and gables declare them to be country houses, such as might look very well if each were put separately in a landscape and provided with an agreeable setting of trees, lawns, and hedges. The effect is not one of spaciousness, for every house looks as if it would like to spread itself, but is not allowed to do so, and for this reason many people find a visit to a garden suburb a most depressing æsthetic experience. Such a type of development is not convenient, for it needlessly increases the size of towns, making it more difficult for their inhabitants to communicate with one another; it is obviously not economical, for large groups and streets of houses are much cheaper to build than detached ones of the same accommodation.

It appears to many people, however, that all these considerations are to be set at naught on account of the low death-rate in garden cities. In a leading article in the *Manchester Guardian*, of October 14th, the writer expressed some measure of agreement with the æsthetic side of the indictment, but was convinced, nevertheless, that the statistics of mortality constitute "a tremendous justification of the movement." We are told that for Manchester, Liverpool, and Bethnal Green, the rates are respectively 19·9, 20·3, and 25 per thousand, while for Bournville, Letchworth, and Hampstead they are 5·7, 4·8, and 4·2. Now these statistics seem at first sight rather imposing, but let us examine them a little more closely to see what they really prove. It will be found that they only tell us something that everybody knew before, namely, that if you plant people out like vegetables upon the country-side their death-rate is less likely to be high than it is in an overcrowded street in a slum. But that is not the point at issue. We are concerned to inquire whether this object of relieving the towns from congestion could

not be more expeditiously achieved by some method other than that suggested by the promoters of the Garden City Movement. Some propagandists are very slow to recognise that there may be two remedies for the same evil, and that in objecting to one remedy, one is not showing approval of the evil itself. There is a certain lack of candour to which social reformers are particularly prone, and they often insinuate that everyone who is unable to accept their own panacea must necessarily be a reactionary.

The pressing need is that there should be much more housing accommodation in order that over-crowding may be prevented. We must ask ourselves, how, given a certain quantity of money to expend, we can erect the largest number of healthy houses. If picturesque little cottages, each surrounded by its own ground, in a garden suburb are cheaper than tenement dwellings in the centre of the town, how much cheaper would the average cost of houses be if, in places where land can be had at a low price, they could be arranged in the old-fashioned formations of streets and other large groups? Let us increase our towns and build new ones, rather than, in our hatred of what is evil in our towns, become blind to their innumerable virtues! It is quite likely that if statistics could be procured dealing with those portions of London, Birmingham, or Manchester, in which the houses are properly built and not inhabited by a greater number of families than they were originally designed to accommodate, it would be found that the rate of mortality would not compare unfavourably with that of Letchworth or Port Sunlight. Statistics such as these might be difficult to obtain, but none other have any bearing on the present controversy. There is another reason why the comparison of figures, which is so dear to the advocates of garden cities, is really invalid. The want of food is just as much the cause of premature death as is the want of air. In a place like the Hampstead suburb the proportion of the very poor is very much less than it is in Poplar, Lewisham, Bermondsey, Shoreditch, Stepney, Burnley, Liverpool, or Stockport. Most of the inhabitants of the Hampstead Garden Suburb are obviously of the middle class, and eat their four meals a day with perfect regularity. There are thousands of people in Bayswater just as healthy as they.

In the article entitled "A defence of the Garden City Movement," which appeared in the last number of this journal, there are some statements which seem to be founded upon a slight misapprehension of the questions at issue. When I expressed the opinion that "some of the worst and most insanitary features of mediæval building" have been incorporated in the picturesque little houses, it is hardly a reply to say that "every window has at least 60 degrees of light." The difficulty

is that the dormers are often so small and the ceilings so sloping that very little light or air can penetrate into the room. Anyone can find many such bedrooms in Letchworth or Hampstead. When we are told that "the design of Garden City Cottages were arrived at only after many architects had competed in two separate cottage exhibitions, in 1905 and 1907, held specially for the purpose," that does not make matters any better. The probability is that the architects in question were compelled, as they too often are, to forego their better judgment in order to please their clients. Something cheap and meretricious was demanded, and so something cheap and meretricious had to be designed. These cottage exhibitions are the bane of architecture and are productive of nothing but reaction. It is impossible to accomplish anything new in the design of such a small entity as a detached cottage for a workman, and the attempt to be original here only leads to eccentricity. It is in the street, the square, and other large formations that there is an opportunity for great artistic achievement, and the fact that these latter are not only quite healthy (provided that overcrowding is prevented), but very much more economical than the detached cottage should commend them to all social reformers.

The critic said there was some inconsistency in referring in the same article to the "101 mediæval knick-nacks in these little cottages" and to "the great contempt of the past that is expressed in the Garden City Movement." Yet there is nothing inconsistent. The "mediæval knick-nacks" are features misappropriated, and no understanding of the past is shown in their use. The mediæval village has much more cohesion than the typical garden suburb, with its horrible riot of gables. On the other hand, the countless examples of detached town-houses, representing as they do, a high standard of domestic architecture, have been entirely without influence upon the design of buildings in the garden suburbs, notwithstanding the fact that these buildings are so close together that they could only appear tolerable to the view if they assumed those rectangular shapes that admit, to a certain extent, of the maintenance of line. These principles have been discovered long ago, and nobody need be ashamed to affirm them, even at the risk of being called "a dogmatist of the worst kind," or "an architectural stick-in-the-past." Progress consists in the building up upon foundations that have already been laid. Of course, if the breach of æsthetic rules is productive of beauty, it is time to question their validity, but when it leads to ugliness and discord, as it does in the garden cities, one may be permitted to contend that the rules are worthy of consideration. In some respects many of the garden city experiments will be of the utmost service to architecture, for they will be standard examples of what to

avoid. We shall be led thereby to a greater appreciation of the beauties which our towns already possess, and in many of our streets, so quiet, dignified, and appropriate, that we are apt to pass along them conscious of nothing but an agreeable sensation we do not take the trouble to define, we shall find conspicuous merit. In Regent Street, in the stucco quarters of London, and in the civic architecture of our eighteenth-century forefathers, people will begin to see virtues they had not noticed before.

The defender of the Garden City Movement cites the South Square and "Wordsworth Walk" at Hampstead as examples of "restraint and discipline in design." It is difficult to find much evidence of "restraint and discipline" in this square. As a formal plan is adopted one would naturally have expected a formal elevation, instead of which each house is accentuated and is given a separate arrangement of windows, with the result that the total effect of the façade is a jumble. If the architect had wished us to regard each house as an isolated entity, and this fact had been expressed not only in elevation, but on plan and in the disposition of the roof, there would have been no cause for criticism. As it is, however, the regular shape of the plan, which is three sides of a rectangle, compels us to read all the houses in unison as if they were a single composition; but their character is such that they do not admit of being so regarded. In fact, the square is the merest parody of the stately squares in Paris, London, Edinburgh, Liverpool, and other places. As for "Wordsworth Walk," it seems to have been designed on paper without reference to the lie of the land. Here we have duplicated groups of picturesque cottages with a path between; but, unfortunately, owing to the slope of the ground on which it is built, one set of cottages is considerably higher than the other, so the total effect is lop-sided to an extreme degree. It is, moreover, questionable whether any very informal array of houses is fit to be made part of a geometrical pattern, however simple. It is an unwarrantable mixture of the formal and informal, and the introduction of an element of stiffness into an arrangement which is only tolerable when we have put away all notion of stiffness. When a soldier, clad in a highly conventional manner, stands at attention, there is no incongruity; but when a crossing-sweeper does the same, the slovenliness of his attire is unduly emphasized. The charm of the informal is that it is unconscious, the product of chance. It is sometimes pleasant to traverse streets where there are no ordered effects, for in such streets (if they are not restless) one can indulge in a complete relaxation of mind, as far as architecture is concerned; but when once you duplicate an informal group of houses, as is done in "Wordsworth Walk," and in many other places both at Letchworth and Hampstead,

it becomes obvious that the whole arrangement was conscious, with the result that you begin to criticise it as a conscious arrangement. As such, however, it will not bear examination for a single moment; there is not enough intellect displayed in it, and it is discrete and utterly devoid of cohesion—as is, in fact, nature, seeing that the designer was trying to capture the charm of the unconscious, the accidental.

I had occasion to express the view that in garden cities, “the garden comes first and the city comes afterwards,” and their defender says: “The fact is that they both come together in their proper proportion, and relation to one another . . . and in most British communities the city comes first and the gardens come seldom, if at all.” It may be admitted that there are not enough gardens in our cities, and that is largely due to the neglect that they suffered during their period of quickest growth, which followed the industrial revolution of the last century. But it must be insisted that our great romanticists were partly responsible for that neglect. At the time of their ascendancy, popular interest in the arts took the form of an intense admiration of nature and of landscape painting; Walter Scott and Ruskin took men back to the Middle Age, so that they thought more of a Gothic church or a ruined castle than of all the mighty achievements which the word “city” should call to mind. During that fatal era, many an open space in our towns, many an old market square was built over, while municipal development was allowed to proceed apace without a vestige of control. The promoters of the garden city movement, with their hatred of the town and their worship of nature, are also Romanticists. The men whose spiritual forefathers wrought such mischief on our towns are not the men to redeem them. In fact, to most of these propagandists, the city as we know it is not even considered worth redemption, and therefore they set about to provide places of refuge from them called “Garden Cities.” A little cottage in the country—that is the popular appeal. The assumption is that we can all have cottages in the country and yet preserve the country. But when you erect cottages in such numbers, and in such proximity that the country is destroyed, the result is a city, and in this case the houses dominate nature, and should express the fact by assuming some of those grand forms of civic architecture with which everybody is familiar. The phrase “Garden City” suggests a multiplicity of houses so close to each other that they must be called a city, and yet of such a character that they are really dominated by the greenery in between, with the result that the first impression on approaching it is that of a park, or a beautiful garden dotted with dwellings. The promoters of garden cities promise to their clients a rustic environment which cannot be had under the circumstances, and the attempt to main-

tain the fiction of rusticity, when the conditions of rusticity are absent, is responsible for a type of development which does not deserve to be called modern or advanced, but is, in effect, rank retrogression, a sinking back to the primitive hut configuration that preceded the era when men were capable of continuous architecture. That comes of putting the garden first, and the city afterwards.

I had stated that the typical suburb of the new type had "neither the crowded interest of the town nor the quiet charm of the country," and my critic replies that "the phrase 'crowded interest of the town' is rather ambiguous in these days of slums and filthy congestions." This attitude is typical of many social reformers; they are so fully engrossed in the study of what is ugly, squalid, and mean that they have no eyes for what is noble. One mentions the word "city," and their thoughts do not fly to Athens, Rome, Florence, Venice, Paris, Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Winchester, Oxford, Edinburgh, or even to our small country towns so famous for their beauty. No, they think of Bermondsey or Poplar. If one refers to the charm of streets, they will immediately think of Whitechapel Road, or the latest jerry-built row of cottages, but never of Regent Street, or the Boulevard des Italiens. I had occasion to refer to the society that dwells in cities, implying that civilisation, as we know it, is the product of city life, and my critic exclaims, "What society? Surely not the tawdry and jaded social atmosphere of a Balham or the snobbish respectability of a Streatham?" How amazing! This sentence should be posted up on placards in all the public halls of Balham and Streatham as an example of the persuasive eloquence of garden city advocates. One would have supposed that to a new movement as theirs, even recruits from such places as Balham and Streatham would have been welcome. Even the greatest people have sometimes stooped to conquer. It is the old story—prosperity has brought pride in its train! Yet it is possible to affirm that anyone who cares to visit these suburbs and to study the physique, general demeanour, and facial expression of their inhabitants, will find that they are quite as beautiful and look just as intelligent as the noble denizens of Letchworth or Golder's Green. But perhaps one is wrong in attaching too much importance to this outburst (against Balham and Streatham). One must remember that little episode in the Iliad, where it is related that Ajax had a quarrel with Agamemnon and exhibited so little self-control that he slaughtered a whole flock of sheep. This is how the innocent sometimes suffer with the guilty!

It may be contended that the garden city movement has served its purpose. It was from the beginning a sectarian movement, which originated in a protest against the overcrowding in our towns.

There is ample evidence that the popular conscience is now fully alive to the gravity of the evils caused by the scarcity of houses, and to this result the garden city advocates have greatly contributed. But while Hampstead and Letchworth are doubtless more healthy than Poplar, many people will hold that these do not represent the best nor even the cheapest type of development. A well-arranged town, smokeless and quiet, with its traffic under good control, having houses and streets in close formation; a town which has a sufficiency of parks, squares, and other public places, but yet contains a considerable population in a relatively small area; a compact town, with a limited number of fairly large detached houses just outside it, immediately beyond which there is nature undefiled:—this is an ideal which seems more attractive than the monotonous diffuseness of Garden Cities.

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