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A DEFENCE OF THE GARDEN CITY MOVEMENT

IT is always refreshing to have the point of view of critics like Mr A. T. Edwards, who are not always conscious of the particular use and purpose Providence apparently intended that they should fulfil in assisting movements like that of the Garden City.* I am sorry that we are wholly strangers to each other, as the intrusion of a Colonial mind anxious to analyse and maybe to diagnose his criticism might perhaps end in ruffling native susceptibilities despite the courtesy which the people of the Motherland are wont to show their overseas brethren. Five years of British cities, people, methods, and habits spread over many parts of England and Scotland are more than sufficient to convince any Colonial that Great Britain is in danger of being overtaken with a social and national disaster beside which conquest by a foreign power seems almost trivial. On all sides the visitor, who stays long enough to see and has sufficient time and intelligence to understand, is impressed by Britain's social ineptitude. He is astounded at the overpowering disorder, the accumulated filth, the appalling waste of life and national vitality, the loss of physique, the defective vision, the extraordinary social inefficiency of great masses of labour (beside which the number of skilled artisans is only a circumstance), and the low standard of ideas, habits, and emotions dominating the proletariat. These things degrade the Motherland in the eyes of younger and more sparsely populated countries, and often the mere superficial impression is misleading and unfair to the homeland. It is not easy for Colonials to realize that England, because of her origin, her development, and the great aggregations of population which make up her cities, has had to struggle and fight against a mass of extraordinary obstructions both human and anti-social in character. But whatever their failings or incapacity to sound the bottom of England's ocean of poverty and slums, Colonials do acquire higher standards of fresh air, space, and cleanliness together with decency of accommodation and plenitude of living. Therefore the social disorder, the dirty and smoky environment and the overcrowding of people into a plethora of dingy, squalid habitations strikes the Colonial imagination with sheer horror—nothing less. In fact if the truth is known the Colonial, whose mind is attuned to a sense of order and an appreciation of nature space, realizes the defects and the social anarchy prevailing in every large British city more acutely than hundreds, if not thousands, of English people born and bred with all the heritage of their environment. The Colonial realizes also that owing to class ignorance, maintained amongst other things by prejudice and a false idea of respectability, many British people fail to grasp, much less understand, the pressing nature of the human problems associated with their civic life. The blots on English civilization are ignored. The average Britisher seems incapable of visualizing or appreciating the tragic importance of facts, such, for instance, as that in 1912, when nearly a million women became mothers, 95 out of every 1,000 lost their babies before they reached one year of life—95,000 mothers suffering every year the loss of their children which they had been at such pain to bear! There is no underlying menace in the equally poignant fact that tuberculosis—a disease intimately associated with bad housing—every week kills as many people in Britain

* See July issue *The Town Planning Review*, p. 150.

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as all those who perished in the "Titanic." These elementary facts and hundreds of others with them (which can be gleaned from any town or city of importance in the land) appear to be treated as things impersonal and detached from the ordinary every-day life of middle-class or aristocratic England. The human tragedy, the pain, the infinite amount of distress or the biting sense of injustice these things day by day engender in the breasts of the multitude are ignored. The prodigious waste of public and municipal resources, the fabulous loss of industrial and social efficiency, the drain upon the national vitality are missed. One hears and sees instead innumerable remarks about insatiable working men, labour agitators, anarchists, socialists, cranks, and faddists, and other favourite epithets from which perfectly well-meaning and so-called "well-educated" people derive infinite personal satisfaction and mental pleasure. Into the midst of all these elements (which apparently constitute the bulwark of "British independence") comes the Garden City movement endeavouring to grapple with and drain the economic and social morass into which England has steadily sunk during the last seventy years and more. It is now fourteen years old, and has not only managed to survive the stream of invective, misrepresentation, and contumacious stupidity which British people have heaped upon it. It has succeeded in housing some 50,000 people who would have otherwise been forced to accept the usual type of suburban villa letting from 5s. up to 15s. per week (rates included). These people would have had to live in the ordinary dreary villa rows without front gardens but with long projecting backs excluding light and air and high boarded fences shutting out the knowledge, the understanding, and the social realization of their fellow-neighbours. Garden spaces (including allotments), tennis fields, club houses where meals or recreation in dancing, billiards, cards, or parties can be indulged in, cinema shows and parks, tree-lined avenues, or gardens rejoicing in the shade and attractiveness of oaks or elms planted years ago in the fields, institutes where children may engage in kindergarten, singing, or dancing, where books may be had or lectures, discourses, or meetings take place—these are only a few of the things which they would have been denied had it not been for the Garden City movement. Five years ago many people were working in factories under all the oppressive conditions and inconvenience caused by the anarchical growth of our large cities and also living in houses for the greater part devoid of sunlight, fresh air, or open spaces, whilst their children played in the overcrowded and fetid street preparatory to becoming future citizens. Parents and children alike existed amid contaminated food supplies, bad atmosphere, overcrowded schools, and other commonplace every-day ills which so many still take for granted. To-day those people are residing at Letchworth Garden City and elsewhere under enormously improved surroundings both in regard to the home they live in and the factories they work in. They possess all the advantages which have already been described. Their houses cost them from 4s. 6d. to 8s. 9d. per week (rates included). Degradation by environment for them has become impossible.

The results of this new and well-organized environment are undeniable in that people are healthier, brighter, and far more efficient units in the social and industrial machine. The vital statistics for Letchworth for 1912 now available once more confirm the claims of the Garden City as a herald in pointing the way to a better age of housing, health, and human happiness. The figures contrast grimly with those of other towns.

(The figures as to mortality at Letchworth and elsewhere are then quoted. They appeared in a recent issue.)

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The medical officer of health for the district in which Letchworth is situated, in his annual report says:

"Numbers of the children coming from large populous towns were anæmic, poor in physique, and large numbers were suffering from adenoid growths and throat affections. This state of things is fast disappearing with the new conditions under which they live."

Whilst these figures may or may not be taken as absolutely correct, the disparity is such as to make the claims of Letchworth and its methods unchallengeable. Garden City, it must be remembered, is a busy manufacturing town containing 40 industries and with a population of over 8,000, drawn largely from crowded industrial centres.

The extraordinary difference in the infantile mortality rate may largely be ascribed to the fact that the smallest cottages do not number more than 12 to the acre, whereas self-contained working-class dwellings in most industrial districts number 30, 40, and even 50 to the acre, with what results the returns from Burnley, Liverpool, and other places show.

The social effects of Garden City are not confined to Letchworth; they are common to all communities which adopt the Garden City method of development such as Hampstead and elsewhere. The before quoted table compiled from official channels for 1911 again illustrates the remarkable disparity in favour of the movement.

Here once more the difference is sufficiently marked to make it quite clear that the Garden City movement in practice has vindicated the principles which were so clearly laid down by Ebenezer Howard in 1899 when *Garden Cities of To-morrow* appeared.

In the face of these facts it is rather fatuous for Mr Edwards to exclaim in a burst of academic supposition, "Of what value is it to have an abundance of fresh air outside if our romanticists forbid us to breathe it?" or to complain with somewhat querulous architectural bias that in adopting "a picturesque style" for Garden City houses "some of the worst and most insanitary features of mediæval building have been incorporated." The charges are as superficial as they are negligible. Not only is ventilation one of the primary considerations of design in a Garden City cottage, but the Town Planner has sought to give every window in every house at least 60 degrees of light. Besides, the modern designs 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. If he would investigate Garden City methods intimately, he may find in time that what he lays down with such emphasis for the guidance of Garden City reformers actually takes place, namely, "The health of the inmates should come first." It is really somewhat disconcerting to find your own fundamental principles preached at you after spending some years hammering them into the heads of the public, but there is some satisfaction in knowing that people who live in the past do eventually get a glimmering of what you are talking about and give forth your teaching as an entirely original idea.

Mr Edwards is not a critic but simply a dogmatist—one of those intensely British dogmatists who are invariably a source of perennial wonder and interest to the Colonial mind, which finds in England some of the finest achievements and some of the greatest abominations in modern civilization. Mr Edwards is, in fact, the worst form of dogmatist, otherwise a species of architectural stick-in-the-past which says houses have been and are—you cannot improve on that which already is. This is

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probably why he makes the astounding claim that "a great contempt of the past is expressed in this Garden City movement," and in the same article complains peevishly about "the hundred and one other mediæval knick-knacks" with which Garden City houses are provided. Far more is there a great contempt of the past expressed in the ordinary suburb where Mr Edwards will find his suggestion illustrated with inimitable forcefulness, namely, houses "built in rows, long ones for preference." In the Garden Suburb of Hampstead and the Garden City at Letchworth are to be found some of the finest civic elements which the past has illustrated; for instance, the town square with its group of public buildings, the street picture, with its architectural composition, the village green, the residential square, and so forth.

Mr Edwards is clearly influenced in his views by respectable and conservative notions (again so deliciously British in their academic rigidity), and quaintly imagines that Garden City architecture expresses a dire "hatred of restraint and discipline in design." Has he for a single moment considered "the restraint and discipline of design" which are to be found in the buildings fronting the South Square at Hampstead, the new estate offices at Letchworth, or in the extreme simplicity of "Wordsworth Walk"? It is not a question in Garden City of formal or informal styles in architecture, but of both, each according to the character and use of the buildings to which they are applied. Garden City economists have long learned the consequences of following the ideas of simply one school or group of architects.

The fundamental fallacy underlying the whole of Mr Edwards' remarks is that he does not seem fully to realize it is economics firstly and architecture secondly which govern not only Garden City houses, but every other modern type of dwelling in the kingdom. It is "mere moonshine" to talk about giving the poorest classes "not a type of house utterly different from what he has ever inhabited, but a slightly larger one with airy bedrooms such as three children could sleep in without detriment to their health." Surely he knows that it is no longer possible to give the same accommodation to-day that was provided five years or even 12 months ago. Building costs have risen at a far greater ratio than the wages and the capacity of the poorer classes to pay rent. In many cases the spending power of the poorer classes has remained unchanged. A three-bedroomed cottage that cost the Howard Cottage Society £150 to build at Letchworth twelve months ago now costs £180 for exactly the same accommodation. Until wages are raised or the economic balance is adjusted in some way the modern architect has no choice but to adjust the accommodation of his cottages according to the new condition. It is a fundamental necessity of having to provide a house at a cost which the tenant can afford to pay.

Yet another fallacy is the assertion, "In a Garden City the garden comes first and the city comes afterwards." The fact is that they both come together in proper proportion and relation to one another, and to call it "retrogression" is simply to be ridiculous, in face of the fact that in most British communities the city comes first and the gardens seldom, if at all.

Let us examine also the assertion: "But of all suburbs, perhaps the most shoddy and depressing is the typical Garden Suburb. It has neither the crowded interest of the town nor the quiet charm of the country. It gives us the advantages neither of solitude nor of society." The phrase "the crowded interest of the town" is rather ambiguous, especially in these days of slums and filthy congestions.

It seems to be just as doubtful as another phrase Mr Edwards employs when he speaks of "the homely streets of the East End." What on earth, may I ask, is the

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value of "noble terraces" or other masterpieces of formal domestic architecture if in these very houses there are two and three families living and the children are dying off like flies? That is exactly what is to be found on personal investigation in some of these "homely streets" of East London. Is architectural form of greater importance than the lives, the health, and the well-being of the people who live in the houses? Then again, the phrase "advantages of society." What society? Surely not the tawdry and jaded social atmosphere of a Balham or the snobbish respectability of a Streatham? It is clear that Mr Edwards has never been either at Letchworth or Hampstead or he would know that much more than the ordinary suburb are they alive with all the advantages of intelligent society. It is made comparatively easy by the presence of the club houses, the institutes, the pageant fields, the lecture halls, and the recreation grounds, all of which are used extensively according to season by the people who live there. And moreover, they are not "cranks and faddists," but average normal decent people who have cultivated to some degree the art and the joy of living.

It generally seems to an outsider like myself that the real "faddists and cranks" are those who persist in living in ugly and inconvenient basement houses, in pretentious mansions fronting some more or less fashionable square and backing on to a filthy accumulation of mews and slum property. At least it is in such environment and domestic surroundings that I have had the delight and interest of meeting many "faddists and cranks," and nowhere do they appear to flourish more than in respectable, right-thinking, middle-class England.

Mr Edwards' criticism of "The Garden City Movement" is little more than the product of a mind which is rather more eager to voice certain academic views of architecture and the working class than to assimilate and understand both the underlying principles and the practical results of the movement in contrast to the anarchic and chaotic mess which to-day is only too true of the mass of Englishmen's homes. The value of his article is to enable one without implication or offence, but as cheerfully as possible to expose the fallaciousness of mistaking temperamental opinions for sociological or economic principles.

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