

Preserving and Maintaining the Concept of Letchworth Garden City

Edited summary of a paper presented by John Lewis to the Society of American City and Regional Planning History conference, October 2013

Letchworth Garden City is the world's first Garden City. The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation (www.letchworth.com) is a self-funding charitable organisation re-investing for the long-term benefit of communities in Letchworth Garden City. The Foundation is the descendant of First Garden City Limited, a private company set up in 1903 to test and prove the validity of Ebenezer Howard's garden city principles by developing the world's first garden city.

Ebenezer Howard sought to combine the very best of town and country living to create healthy homes for working people. In his book *'To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform'* Howard described how garden cities would be planned new settlements respectful of the natural environment providing high quality affordable housing and locally accessible jobs. Residents would enjoy a full range of social, educational and leisure facilities as well as jobs, decent homes and an environment which would promote health and wellbeing. The development of garden cities was underpinned by a set of principles which helped to convert Howard's utopian ideals into real living places.

The acquisition of the Letchworth-Willian Estate on 24 June 1903 secured 3818 acres of land as the canvas upon which to paint the ideals of Ebenezer Howard. The First Garden City Ltd, a private company responsible for the development of the estate, agreed to limit the dividends to shareholders to a maximum of 5% with the remaining surpluses to be captured and distributed for the benefit of all local communities. When the estate started to make a profit after the Second World War, a hostile takeover bid was fought off by local authority and community-led action. The company's successor, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, has been vested the original estate, which had grown in size to 5300 acres, in order to manage it on behalf of the communities of Letchworth.

Social reinvestment model

Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin worked with the topography of the land to create a masterplan of the entire garden city. While Letchworth is often described by its aesthetic qualities, their idea was to build a town in which the best possible physical conditions for a community might be secured. To ensure that the garden city was a viable town, it was vital that local people moving to Letchworth had the offer of local employment. With this in mind the masterplan included 135 acres of land designated to the east of the town for commercial development. The land was serviced by rail, road and utilities, and initial business rents were highly competitive.

The legacy of Unwin and Parker is clearly evident in the maturing tree-lined avenues, open spaces and arts and crafts architecture provide a strong visual identity for the town which has subsequently influenced place development globally. What is less known is the town's reinvestment model. At the heart of the Garden City concept is a social model of capturing value created within the town and then reinvested back into the town for the benefit of the local community. This fundamental principle from the Garden City Movement has been preserved and continues today under the management of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation.

In basic terms, the model is about earning money commercially and recycling the surpluses for the public benefit of the local communities in the town. What makes Letchworth unique is that this operational model has not been replicated on this scale anywhere else.

The Foundation has assets of more than £100million comprising a varied commercial and residential property portfolio. These assets create an annual income stream of approximately £9 million of which more than £4million is made available for reinvestment in a wide and varied range of initiatives, including: a free health treatment centre; a four-screen art deco cinema; a free local transport network to take residents to and from their social clubs; community information hub and meeting space ; an international garden cities exhibition; a garden city study centre; tourist information centre; and farm attraction. The income funds the administration of the Scheme of Management, which helps to retain the physical heritage of the town. It also provides for grants to individuals, groups and organisations to support a wide variety of activities that bring depth and interest to the town ensuring it is more than just a model of urban planning.

The Foundation has no statutory responsibilities (roads, schools, hospitals are provided by local authorities as in other UK towns). The extra projects provided are guided by their six charitable commitments which dictate the themes under which the Foundation can support projects and services for the benefit of local communities in the town:

- Heritage and Environment;
- Education and Learning;
- Recreation and Leisure;
- Health and Well Being;
- Locally based Charities; and
- Charitable Activities undertaken in Letchworth.

Governance and accountability

The governance structure means that important decisions on where income is invested does not rest with the Executive, but with the Governors and Board of Trustees, the membership of which is either elected by the local community, nominated by local clubs and societies or appointed by the Heritage Foundation. The Board also comprises Councillor representatives from the District and County Councils. A multi-disciplined team of approximately 100 is employed by the organisation to provide direct service support and to manage contracted out service providers.

Letchworth is a town which has played a significant role in influencing the design of towns and suburbs across the world. When considering new projects and proposals the Heritage Foundation is committed to involving the 32,000 local residents to ensure today's demands are discussed in the context of past achievements. The Foundation's commitment to openness and transparency helps to connect activities with the aims and aspirations of the town. Feedback and views are shared through monthly public 'drop in' surgeries hosted by the Governors, and a more formal annual open town meeting which sets out how the Foundation has performed over the past year and details the services provided and the grants given.

Preserving and Maintaining the Legacy

First Garden City Ltd insisted on retaining freehold ownership of its Estate, to control developments on its land and create the necessary financial resources to fund future investment for the benefit of the town. When national legislation gave leaseholders of residential properties the right to buy the freehold from the landlord, the estate risked the loss of overall management which aimed to maintain the design principles of the original plan. To help address this, a Scheme of Management was created and people buying their freeholds in the town were, and still are, required to sign up to it. The Scheme's objective is to preserve the appearance and character of Letchworth Garden City. Under this, permission is required before making external changes to Garden City homes. The Scheme also prevents plots being divided for small scale demolition and re-development, which has helped preserve the original density of development. The Scheme of Management preserves the architectural integrity of the town.

Conclusion

The principles of the Garden City Movement are preserved and maintained at Letchworth Garden City. It is the translation of this legacy into a modern interpretation that offers the greatest opportunity for maintaining the successes of the past.

The long-term success of Letchworth can be attributed to its understanding at the outset of the importance of having an estate stewardship regime in place. However beautifully designed a place may be, if it is not properly maintained the impact of decline and deterioration will undermine its initial success. The Garden City principles clearly have long-term stewardship as a priority, yet often the development of towns, suburbs and other new settlements do not consider how they will be maintained in perpetuity.

The combination of income streams generated from within the town and the mutual ownership of local assets has the ability to support an operational mechanism which can ensure the long-term success of the place itself. A successful organisation needs to be non-political, have a clearly defined role and be able to focus on achieving long-term objectives.

The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation continues to manage its resources for the town in order to meet the needs and desires of local communities today and in the future.

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