

The Resignification of the Garden Suburb as International Heritage

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Abstract

The garden suburbs, developed around the turn of the 20th century, are often defined as the inferior version of the Garden City model created by E. Howard in 1898, England, mainly due to their overlapping design principles. However, this definition appears to be a perfunctory conclusion as the story behind the garden suburb is rather complex, and the origin predates the Garden City creation. Understanding the term and its design principles is essentially the initial step to be taken towards designing successful preservation strategies for these endangered garden suburbs. With only scattered mentions in the literature, there is still no consensus on the definition and concepts of the garden suburb, leading to the undervaluation of its potential role in future urban developments. This research aims to take the first steps towards envisioning a new future scenario for the garden suburbs. The study contributes, through literature studies, to the still ongoing debate by unravelling (mis-) conceptions behind the garden suburb. This results in a comprehensive taxonomy used as a base for discussion on the origin, definition, concept, and migration of the garden suburbs. In addition, the research redefines the significance of preserving the garden suburbs, and recognises its international relevance.

Keywords

garden suburb, international heritage, holistic planned community, Garden City

How to cite

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INTRODUCTION

During the late 19th century, the era of social reform and the search for better living conditions, the garden suburb developed, among a variety of many other urban concepts and utopias, including the Garden City (1898)¹. These urban innovations were a reaction towards the industrialization and the resulting worsening conditions in the cities all around the world. With the invention and explosive growth of the railway network, it became possible to change the social society through suburbanization². As a result, the garden suburb reached its peak around the turn of the 20th century. By this time it was recognized by the British government as a way to control the rapid growth of cities³. Meanwhile, the garden suburb was internationally boosted due to the association of the term with Howard's Garden City and other utopian ideas that envisioned gardens in urban planning⁴. Consequently, the understanding of the garden suburb began to diminish due to confusion with other terms. Many relatively green neighbourhoods were mislabelled as garden suburbs or Garden Cities, despite bearing little resemblance with the design principles, leading to the erosion of the original concepts.

Since the distinction between the garden suburb and the Garden City is still lacking in the common literature, even though one "...can hardly avoid the realization that the underlying principles of the garden city and the suburbs are absolutely different."⁵, it is essential to start there. A common misconception is the idea that the garden suburb is a descendant of the Garden City and can be interpreted as a small-scale version of it. It's important to realize that the Garden City is a very specific city model, that allows very little variations and is thoroughly explained in Howard's 168-page book⁶. Only two authentic Garden Cities have been built, according to Howard himself, although he believed they didn't fully realize his utopian vision⁷. In contrast to the Garden City, the garden suburb is a concept that is highly adaptable to local contexts, with several fundamental principles, which allow for numerous variants, many of which were built in the early 20th century. Even though not applied in all its variants, the core of the garden suburb concept is evident, and is known for its preplanned character, that relates to a relatively green, high-quality and healthy design, often achieved through a low-density urban layout, embedded with a specific socio-economic concept⁸.

The misunderstanding of the garden suburbs is one of the main contributing factors to the endangered situation they are facing in the contemporary city. During the last decades, the survival of the garden suburbs is threatened worldwide by the force of urban expansion. As cities are driven to the extreme and are given limited options regarding growth pressures, the globally dispersed garden suburbs are increasingly viewed as old-fashioned and anti-urban. They have to make place for new high-rise developments, often violating their protective status⁹. It can be stated that the garden suburb has lost its value and is being overlooked¹⁰. Often, these suburbs are confronted with two destructive future scenarios: privatization and gentrification, eroding their original purpose and social inclusiveness, or neglection, until demolition becomes justifiable.

There is an urgent need to generate new ideals to safeguard and revitalize the design principles of the garden suburbs regarding the current and future challenges they are facing¹¹. In

response to these challenges, this paper proposes the hypothesis that the principles of the garden suburb design are more relevant than ever before. Their highly-adaptable character to different urban contexts presents an opportunity to explore new ways of connecting cities and nature through architectural and urban heritage, which is arguably one of the main concepts of the garden suburb utopia. However, with only scattered mentions in the literature and a lack of recognition of its value and strengths¹², the initial step that needs to be taken is to provide a deeper understanding of the garden suburb in order to recognize it as significant cultural heritage after which the preservation process can start¹³. This paper seeks to extend the limits of the academic field of the garden suburb. It builds on the existing knowledge, and aims to myth-bust the historical misunderstandings, in particular to distinguish the concept from the Garden City. It also attempts to indicate the global migration of the garden suburb in order to establish their place as integral components in the field of international heritage. Moreover, the role and significance of garden suburbs in the contemporary society will be redefined, contributing to the discussion to restore their original purpose.

DEFINITION THROUGH HISTORY AND DISTINCTION FROM THE GARDEN CITY

Initially, it may seem easy to define the garden suburb as a significant portion of sources in the related literature tend to begin their investigations with a definition of the term. However, upon closer examination, the sources appear to contradict each other rather than align. As we open the debate on the definition, it becomes clear that there are many other terms associated and often confused with the garden suburb, such as the Garden City and the garden village. As a result, the garden suburb has been given different meanings, which are explained by different variations in design and realization. Moreover, the term has been used in different contexts all over the world and the design has been transformed and adjusted to the local conditions¹⁴. The lack of consensus on the definition and concept, still existing today, can be explained by its diverse origins. Even though England is often related to the origin of the garden suburb, it is far from being solely English¹⁵. The garden suburb developed mainly through a closely intertwined urban development between London and New York City the two largest and fastest growing cities at the end of the 19th century¹⁶.

The roots of the garden suburb can be traced back to the Romantic era, coinciding with the rise of landscape architecture and town planning as disciplines¹⁷. During this period, the 18th and 19th century, there was a notable shift towards favouring the natural and rural environment¹⁸, evident in the ideals of William Morris, who perceived cities as 'something to escape from'¹⁹. The garden became a symbol of a healthier and better future²⁰. It is challenging to establish a direct relationship between the origin of the garden suburb in England and the United States, as there is a great difference between related English and American literature. On top of that, the garden suburb seems to lack its own dedicated literature in both countries. English literature related to the garden suburb is primarily focused on the concept of the Garden City and urban planning as a discipline, while American literature covering the garden suburb is more centred around suburbanization, and only sporadically mentions the garden suburb.

In England, the garden suburb seems to have derived from a tradition of searching a better life for the working class, following a line of utopian-socialist predecessors²¹. This started with the utopian villages later evolved into model villages, garden villages and the Garden City²². It seems that the garden suburb arose gradually along with the growing attention shift towards the living conditions and health inside the city, evidently predating the Garden City by several decades²³. Since "...one day's suburb often became the next day's slum..."²⁴, the garden suburb was the solution for the uncontrolled expansion of the city inhabited by the lower class.

In the United States, it appears that the 'ancestor' of the garden suburb already started its development by the so-called 'dreamers', who were glorifying the rural life, envisioning a utopian life mainly for the middle and upper class²⁵. This anti-urban ideal and green city concept became one of the cornerstones of America's urban planning in the 19th century²⁶. Since the United States was lacking regional planning by public authorities, the search for a new type of family life was mainly led by private entities, that were traveling to England and Europe for inspiration on suburban typologies²⁷. It's important to stress the great difference in socio-economic concept between the origin of the garden suburb in England, aimed at the working class, and in the United States, the middle and upper class.

At the end of the 19th century, the garden suburb concept was established and the term started to be used broadly²⁸. This is the moment where we enter the age of rapid development and change. City planning movements spread in a climate of internationalism through publications and great events²⁹. The international migration of the garden suburb was mainly due to the connection with the Garden City, one of the most famous and extensively promoted urban utopias³⁰. The Garden City was created by Ebenezer Howard and published in 1898, Britain, and later revised in 1902. Howard's idea was to build a completely new city on the country side according to specific conditions, which are extensively explained in his book. It's important to realize that the Garden City is a design for society, prescribing a disciplined lifestyle shaped by urban design, and the definition is the model itself³¹. The city was planned in its entirety, in an almost 'scientific' way, considering precise proportions. The timing of Howard was exactly right, as conditions in big cities reached a low³², and his 'unique combination of proposals'³³ was embraced on a great international scale. He distilled the garden city concept from significant writers and idealists, who had a great influence at that time, such as Thomas Spence, Frederick Law Olmsted, Alfred Marshall, Peter Kropotkin, James Silk Buckingham, Benjamin Ward Richardson, Robert Owen, Edward Bellamy, and so on³⁴.

It seems that right from the start, the Garden City was misunderstood. Not only was it understood as a primarily environmental model, neglecting the social reformation and holistic vision, but also the scale of the idea was misinterpreted³⁵. The term has often been used to describe small scale neighbourhoods, such as garden suburbs and garden villages. Howard tried to distinguish his Garden City from other urban planning terminologies, but without success³⁶. Eventually, the terminology around garden suburbs, villages and cities became very complex and subsequently "... began to be synonymous with suburbia."³⁷. In particular, the misuse of the garden suburb term resulted in a loss of value³⁸. Until today, the garden suburb has often been defined as the corollary or even inferior version of the Garden City.

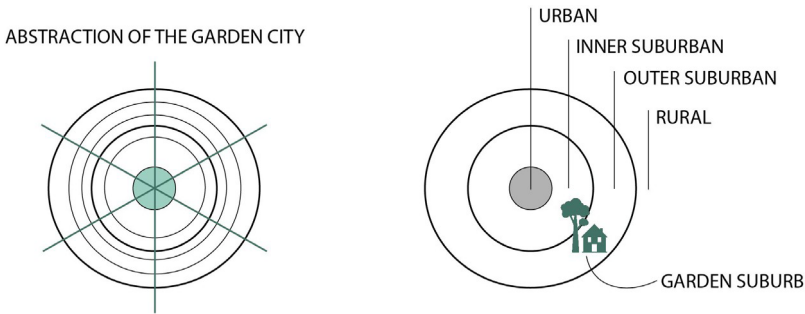


Fig. 1. The distinction between the Garden City and the garden suburb. Left: an abstraction of the Garden City; a model for a completely new city located on agricultural land far from developed urban areas. Right: the original place of the garden suburb situated on the outskirts of an existing city.

In order to define the garden suburb term, it's essential to acknowledge that the garden suburb is a broad term, arguably an umbrella term³⁹, used for a wide array of green, healthy enclaves or districts established worldwide during the late 19th and early 20th century. Often, these suburbs are designed with a specific social plan. The garden suburbs are highly adaptable to existing cities in which they are implemented by following a set of global design elements which are part of the overarching international garden suburb idea. These global design elements include recognizable features, such as preplanned layouts, unity in urban design, the acquisition of low-priced land on the city outskirts, proximity to public transportation and large green spaces, and health-conscious urban and housing design. Typically, the implementation of this healthy design in garden suburbs was realized through low- dense urban layouts rich in green spaces and high-quality constructions, relatively to their surroundings. Additionally, less evident elements, yet found in the majority of garden suburbs worldwide, include internal reserves⁴⁰, networks of small footpaths⁴¹, horizontal façade compositions⁴², and arguably the pergola serving as a symbol for the garden suburb. In order to realize the global concept of the garden suburb, architects and designers often used a vernacular and traditional architecture style, incorporating local materials and characteristics of the local climate⁴³. The vernacular architecture is part of the reason for the quality and durability of the garden suburbs⁴⁴. The fusion of localism and internationalism in the architecture of the garden suburb is essential for understanding its design.

THE WORLDWIDE MIGRATION OF THE GARDEN SUBURB

Due to the international domination of London and New York City, as previously noted, the garden suburb concept migrated all over the world during the early 20th century and was boosted by the Garden City Movement⁴⁵. Before a definitive understanding of the garden suburb and its distinction from the Garden City was established, these terms, along with the garden village, had already been interpreted in various ways across different countries and adjusted to the local conditions⁴⁶. On top of that, the terms were often translated in a way that increased confusion⁴⁷. Eventually, the three terms garden suburb, garden city and garden

village were used as synonyms. In reality, the realized garden-housing-design often bore closer resemblance to a garden suburb, even though it was labelled with the term Garden City:

“Suburbs, villages and cities became sadly mixed up in the popular mind, with results detrimental to the movement, and things became worse when speculative builders and companies began to use these names as attractions to estates which had no substantial claim to them. ... The term ‘Garden City’ has been applied, even more often abroad than at home, to enterprises which are not in accord with the full principle. The ‘cités-jardins,’ established by the Department of Seine, are no more than garden suburbs. There is even now no ‘Gardenstadt’ in Germany which actually bears or is entitled to that name. The ‘Ciudad Lineal’ of Madrid, while it realises several garden city principles, distinctly breaks away from others. Radburn, in the neighbourhood of New York, is a Hampstead rather than a Letchworth.”⁶⁸

To fully understand the impact of the garden-housing concepts, the migration of the three terms, garden suburb, garden city and garden village, is mapped, indicating the worldwide spread of these terms. The map (figure 2) is based on the existing literature that covers the spread of three terms. It becomes evident from the map that the migration of the concepts reaches far beyond their origins in Europe and the United States. The adoption of these terms by numerous countries occurred at various points in time and is categorized according to the timeframes of World War I and II, explained in the legend of the map. The bigger aim of the map is to highlight the international relevance of the garden suburbs and to advocate for their recognition as international modern heritage. The survival of the suburbs and their strengths is a worldwide issue and the care of these sites and preservation of the concept are essential to maintain their history and valuable design characteristics.

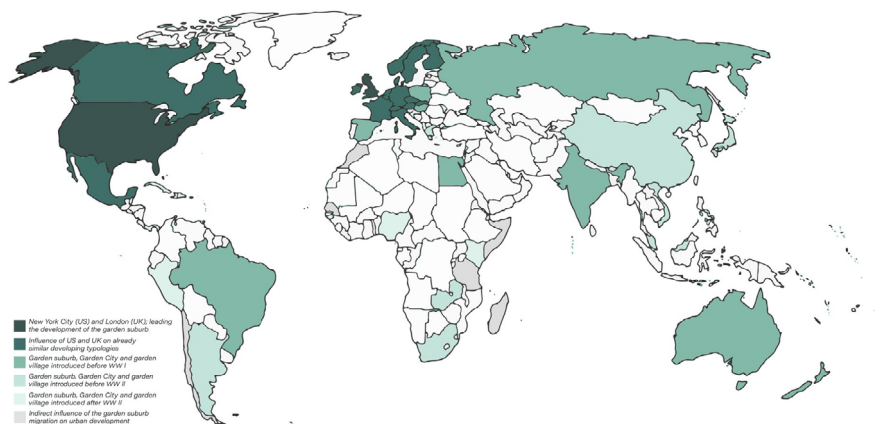


Fig. 2. The global spread of the garden suburb, Garden City and garden village, categorized by time and direct and indirect influence. New York City and London are identified as the primary pioneers in the development of the garden suburb.

THE TAXONOMY OF THE GARDEN SUBURB

When exploring the definition of the garden suburb, it becomes clear that various terms are associated. In reality, the term garden suburb seems to include a multitude of terms, each explaining a different type of garden suburb with nuanced interpretations of the design principles. The most comprehensive international collection of garden suburb types can be found in the book 'Paradise Planned; The Garden Suburb and the Modern City'⁴⁹. While the classification presented by the authors may be subject to debate, the concept of classification itself holds value. Delving deeper into this topic, this research paper presents a comprehensive collection of garden suburb types in the form of a taxonomy diagram. The diagram (figure 3) aims to acknowledge and recognize the diversity of terms related to the garden suburb, and to establish a historical overview on the garden suburb development. The collection consists of pre-planned communities, that served as turning points in the historical development of the garden suburb, beginning as early as the 18th century, marking the beginning of the prehistory of the garden suburb⁵⁰. The taxonomy diagram encompasses the evolution over time and the variations in social concepts regarding the American and English origins. The diagram is shaped in the form of a timeline, where each term is placed according to the emergence of the first community associated with it, as determined by the dominant consensus in the existing literature. A distinction has been made between American and English terms. In addition, the diagram is divided into the workers' class and the middle and upper class, with each term positioned along a hypothetical horizontal axis that determines the integrated social concept. As a result, the difference in social concept between the American and English garden suburb becomes clearly visible.

Upon analysing the taxonomy diagram, it is clear that the definition of the garden suburb should be broad and inclusive. After an extensive literature research, two definitions within the American and English literature have been selected as encapsulating the essence most effectively. Within the American literature, Kroessler presents a concise definition:

"Yes, the planned garden suburb emerged out of a utopian impulse, a vision of what urban living could be if we were only bold enough to start anew, but it was also a pragmatic response to the overcrowded, unsanitary, unhealthy, and socially destructive conditions found in European and American cities."⁵¹

In the English literature, Richard Harris offers a comprehensive historical definition, describing the main characteristics of the garden suburb:

"The word 'suburb' was born in late eighteenth century England where it soon captured people's imagination. That is not surprising: by 1850, Britain had become the first urban nation, in that a majority of people then lived in cities. This trend involved large-scale suburbanization, a process that continued through the late nineteenth century. Working-class districts in industrial cities were crowded and unhealthy. Those who could escape to the suburbs did so, and reformers extolled the anti-urban virtues of suburban living: a healthier environment that was better for children; more space in and around the home; access to nature, in gardens and parks; a moral, home-centered life, distant from the corrupting influ-

*ences of the city (Clapson, 2003, pp. 51-78). The purest version was called 'the garden suburb' (Whitehand and Carr, 1999). It was an appealing vision, a suburban ideal.*⁵².

This research paper argues that the garden suburbs from the workers' class category in the taxonomy can be classified as a distinct type: the social garden suburb. This type is designed with a conscious social inclusiveness, which can be described as "... an attainable, inhabitable arcadia for everyman."⁵³. They are a product of the progressive era of housing reform and possess an experimental nature in terms of community shaping⁵⁴. The social garden suburb can be defined as follows: 'The social garden suburb is a distinct category within the inventory of garden suburb, which emerged during the era of social reform in the 19th century as a response to overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions in cities. The social garden suburb is characterized by preplanned designs that regulate cities' growth and break away from traditional urban forms, through an urban model that incorporates more open spaces and access to nature, and focuses on the health and well-being of people. Additionally, this type of garden suburb stands out for its affordable housing options for a diverse mix of socio-economic classes, with a significant portion of housing reserved for the lower class.' Regarding the contemporary social and planning needs, the social garden suburb remains highly relevant. Its design principles could offer inspiration and potentially serve as a basis for an adapted urban model that addresses the needs of future generations.

CONCLUSION: THE GARDEN SUBURB IN THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

During the last century, the situation of the garden suburbs has changed significantly. Generally, with exception of some successful cases mainly in the United Kingdom and Australia, their current state is outdated and they have been neglected⁵⁵. The garden suburb faces several challenges considering a comprehensive international scope, with the main issues being urban high-rise expansion and densification, industrial growth, social segregation and gentrification⁵⁶. The suburbs, originally built on the edges of cities, encounter challenges in terms of their ability to adapt⁵⁷. Slowly, the garden suburbs worldwide are becoming part of the expanding city centre or the growing industrial area as a result of their strategic positioning (figure 4). The expansion of expensive urban high-rise developments poses a threat to their distinctive character, potentially eroding their unique qualities. The absence of plans to modernize garden suburbs to meet future needs leads to their neglect and eventual demolition. They grapple with the pressures of the evolving needs of the housing market, due to the escalating land value and rising house prices⁵⁸. In particular, the social garden suburbs that were once designed for the working class now find themselves surrounded by expensive high-rise typologies, facing threats to their original inclusive intention. On top of that, the garden suburbs face criticism for their perceived unsustainability, anti-urban nature, and lack of climate resilience⁵⁹. Despite all these challenges, there is a limited availability of models and guidelines to support major cities in effectively managing the expansion of their outskirts⁶⁰.

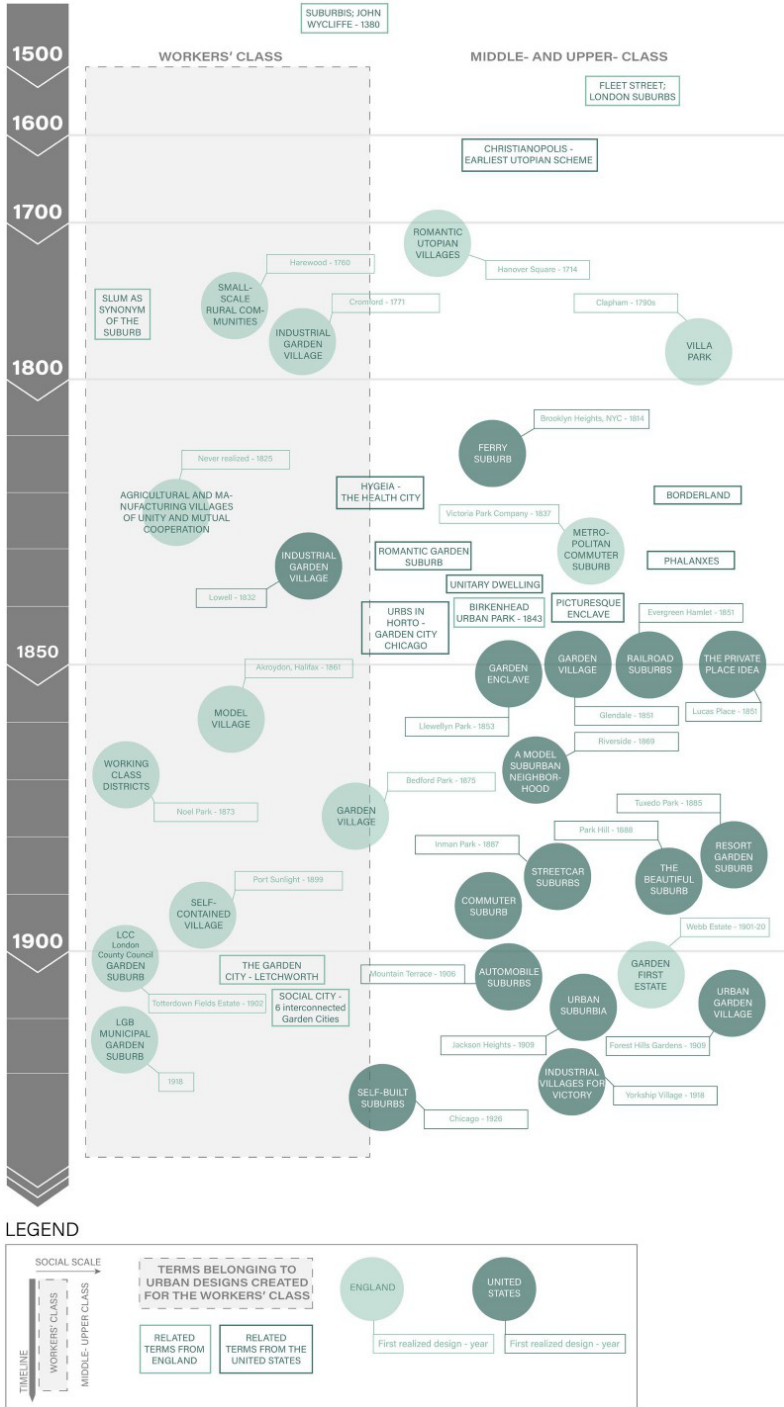


Fig. 3. The taxonomy of the garden suburb. Related American and English terms to the concept of the garden suburb are placed in a vertical timeline with the first realized design. A horizontal axis determines the integrated social concept.

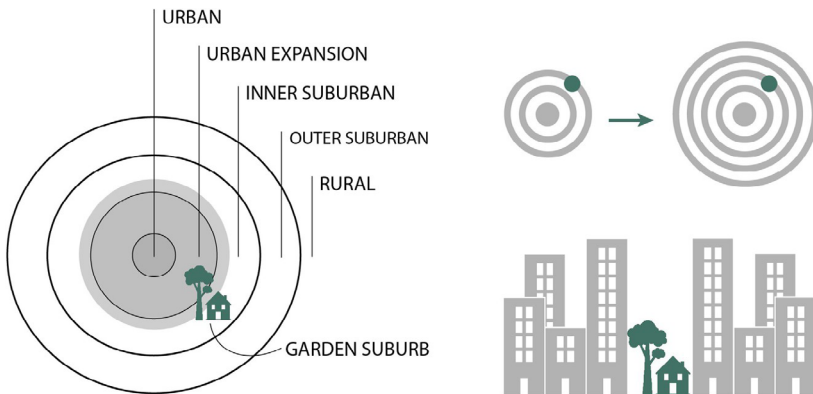


Fig. 4. The 'change of place' of the garden suburb, causing a number of challenges including urban development pressures, neglect and potential demolition, social exclusion, privatization and gentrification.

However, there is an opportunity to turn the situation around. In a similar manner, cities are facing comparable challenges as during the industrial revolution of the 19th century: densification and the land is scarce, social inequalities and the ever-increasing urban sprawl⁶¹. As a response, while searching for a sustainability future, we are rediscovering the value of earth's natural resources and reconsidering our existing built heritage⁶². There has been a noticeable shift in urban development from a fragmented approach to a more integrated approach that incorporates the physical, economic, and social aspects⁶³. It can be stated that the main principles of the garden suburbs design, such as access to green spaces, high-quality housing and design elements aimed at improving the well-being of the community, are more relevant than ever. In particular, the social garden suburbs, with affordable housing for all socio-economic classes, create opportunities for high-quality urban living and socially engaged communities⁶⁴. They represent the green and socially inclusive society that is sought after, moved by new environmental and social consciousness. By reviving the garden suburbs, using their strengths and making them stand out as sustainable, green and social catalysts, we will be able to find new ways of connecting cities and nature through architectural and urban heritage. The garden suburb deserves to be replaced in the developing network of contemporary utopian ideas, where they are no longer seen as a bourgeois idyll or romantic retreat, but an experimental place in which new ways are found to use heritage as a resource⁶⁵. To conclude, this study emphasizes the importance of their preservation and the risk of losing this valuable international heritage. Preserving the garden suburb extends beyond its architecture and urban design, implying that we should not freeze these suburbs in time, but rather explore opportunities for adaptation while using their strengths. The monumental character includes intangible qualities such as affordable housing, walkability, distribution of green spaces, and so on, making the garden suburbs exceptionally adaptable. The complexity of this type of preservation highlights the need of establishing guidelines and strategies for the care of the garden suburbs.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Hannah Jeanne Baghuis is a second-year PhD student in the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies at the Politecnico di Milano, Italy. Her current research focuses on enhancing preservation strategies for the early 20th century garden suburbs in response to emerging challenges with cases from Italy, the United States, and the Netherlands. She received her Bachelor's degree in architecture in 2019 and her Master's degree in architecture in 2021, both at the Technical University of Delft, The Netherlands.

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2. Avermaete and Gosseye, *Urban Design in the 20th Century; A History*, 34.
3. Stern, Fishman, and Tilove, *Paradise Planned: The Garden Suburb and the Modern City*, 17.
4. Whitehand and Carr, "England's Garden Suburbs: Development and Change", 76.
5. Creese, *The Search for Environment: The Garden City: Before and After*, 6.
6. Howard, "To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform".
7. Tagliaventi, *Città Giardino; cento anni di teorie, modelli, esperienze*, 173.
8. Stern, Fishman, and Tilove, *Paradise Planned: The Garden Suburb and the Modern City*, 11.
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24. Bolsterli, "Corporate Happiness' in the first garden suburb", 7.
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26. Totaforti, "The Garden City and the American Dream", 129.; Avermaete and Gosseye, *Urban Design in the 20th Century; A History*, 21.
27. Golany, "New Communities in the United States", 1-22.
28. Lopez, "Building a Suburban Utopia", 68.
29. Miller, "Garden Cities and Suburbs: At Home and Abroad", 11.
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33. Howard, "To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform".
34. Hall and Ward, *Sociable cities: the legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, 11-12.; Totaforti, "The Garden City and the American Dream", 132; Bergvelt and Venema, *Amsterdamse school 1910-1930*, 15.
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37. Hardy, "Utopian ideas and the planning of London", 35–49.
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IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1 Image credit: Author. Based on Howard's original drawings of the Garden City and descriptions of the garden suburb's original location sourced for this study.

Figure 2 Image credit: Author. Based on: Beevers, *The Garden City Utopia*.; Bigon and Katz, *Garden cities and colonial planning*.; Creese, *The Search for Environment: The Garden City: Before and After*.; Hall and Ward, *Sociable cities: the legacy of Ebenezer Howard*.; Hutchings, "Garden suburbs in Latin America"; Macfadyen, *Sir Ebenezer Howard and The Town Planning Movement*.; Miller, "Garden Cities and Suburbs: At Home and Abroad"; Stern, Fishman, and Tilove, *Paradise Planned*.; Ward, *The Garden City; Past, present and future*.

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Figure 4 Image credit: Author. Based on the latest sources in the literature used for this study.