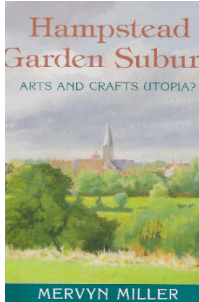


Hampstead Garden Suburb: Arts and Crafts Utopia?

By Mervyn Miller. Pub. Phillimore & Co Ltd, Chichester, England 2006. Price £30



Review by Alan Byrne, senior regional planning adviser, English Heritage

Thomas More, Henry VIII's martyred chancellor, sought to build utopia in the hearts of men. Despite his personal demise and the decapitation of his vision of a paradise on earth, his gift to England was to plant a seed; the thought that the human spirit could achieve a God-blessed, ideal form of societal organisation in which all were fulfilled materially and spiritually. Perhaps.

All the same, a good idea never quite goes away, no matter that the mind is separated from the body. However improbable its realisation, the dream recurs through time and place and eventually finds physical expression in a time and place unrelated to its genesis. Utopian idealism was buried deep in English enlightened, liberal, radical philosophy for half a millennium before germinating in the proto-socialism of the arts and craft movement. Ruskin, Morris and the loose coalition of politicians, writers, artists, architects, designers and craftsmen around them may not have been consciously building Blake's

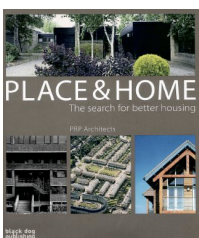
'Jerusalem' but as inheritors of More's vision they led a crusade for an improvement in the human condition that spawned, inter alia, the quintessentially English garden city movement.

Ebenezer Howard crystallised the visionary concept into a plan for a settlement pattern that influenced an upcoming generation of town and country planners, amongst whom Raymond Unwin was to take a leading role. Guided by the inspirational Henrietta Barnett, Unwin set about creating an ideal dwelling place on the ridge above Hampstead Heath which all could look up to. This is the story told in Miller's book - not a mere narrative description of the process, though this is encompassed, but a telling, gutsy rendition of a painful attempt to construct a happy isle. The (relative) success of this endeavour is plain to see. The Suburb is a popular, and expensive, place to live.

The less obvious troubles that have beset the place are also displayed, up to an including the

contemporary tensions of the eruv and the dispute between the Institute and Henrietta Barnett School over land and ownership of their shared site. This is the real benefit of Miller's tome - it depicts a full-blown oily landscape, not the weedy pen and ink sketches of the many of the legion of London village books. Miller clearly lives and breathes the place, but he is not blind to the limitations of the vision - hence the question-mark in the title.

This is a much revised and significantly updated reprint of the original 1992 book by Miller and A. Stuart Gray and coincides with the centenary of Hampstead Garden Suburb. Anyone familiar with the first edition will be delighted by the additional material which adds meat to an already full plate. In particular, the social history of the Suburb is more fully drawn in key respects and helps the reader get under the skin of the place - not always an easy task for the outsider to this seemingly exclusive enclave.



Review by Bernard Hunt, Chairman of HTA and of Design for Homes.

Place and Home: the search for better housing – PRP architects

Published by Black Dog Publishing £34.95

I have known PRP for most of the 44 years covered in this book. For our year out between third and fourth years at Cambridge, John Thompson and I found our nepotistic way (my father was a client) to the Welwyn Garden City office of RMJM. There David Parkes was my boss. (Andrew Derbyshire was David's boss and with elegant symmetry, when it came to his son Benjamin's year out, he chose to work at HTA!) In 1966 at RMJM all the bright young architects lived in The Ryde at Hatfield, PRP's recently

completed first project. They brought the fun and buzz of life at The Ryde into the serious, ordered world of RMJM and they couldn't wait to get back home to race each other with their Scalectrix cars in the community centre. When I visited them I couldn't believe my eyes. These were houses like I had never imagined they could be - beautiful, rational and innovative, they set the pulse racing.

It would be wrong to dismiss as vanity publishing this thoughtful, intelligent review of the work which,

in the years since it was founded in 1963, has propelled PRP from its modest beginnings to its current position as one of the UK's largest architectural firms. In almost 300 pages packed with colour photographs and drawings, and with essays not only by PRP's founders and their successors, but also by Peter Stewart, Stephen Mullin, and Jeremy Melvin, the book is interesting for what it says both about the UK housing context over these years and about PRP's contribution to it.

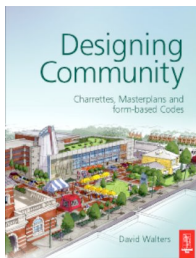
Jeremy Melvin astutely points out that this context depends on three propositions, all recent and all open to question. That the state has responsibility for housing; that mass housing is part of 'architecture'; and that in an affluent society 'no sharp distinction can be made between luxuries and necessities' (JK Galbraith).

PRP's culture was inherited from the public sector ethos of LCC and MoHLG and the private firms like RMJM and Sheppard Robson which succeeded them. It was a culture of rational, research based design

committed to the task of 'making the world a better place'. Learning from the LCC, PRP used generic solutions to create a grammar of housing design, manipulating plan and section to achieve functional housing of quality efficiently and economically. And they mastered the art of responding to the twists and turns of government policy which dictated the rules of the game. But as Barry Munday and Chris Rudolph say in their conclusion 'whenever the state has intervened over-enthusiastically, the law of unintended consequences has

usually applied'. Are these consequences responsible for the fact that little of the housing produced by any us over these years is loved as much as that which was built in a past when neither the state nor the architect were involved?

Consumers want their home to be their dream, not just a rational response to their needs. So it's no surprise that the star of this book is The Ryde, where a passionate client inspired three talented young architects to realise his dream of the perfect place to live.



David Gallagher is principal of architects DGA

Designing Community

Charrettes, Masterplans and Form-Based Codes by David Walters. Published by Elsevier / Architectural Press 2007 266 pages

"Those that cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it", wrote philosopher George Santayana. Only modernist doctrine considered it cool or appropriate to revel in the destruction of the past. However, the failings of modernism from the 1950's through the 1970's were not perpetrated by an evil or careless core of professionals hell-bent on destroying the past: they were largely the result of honest, sincere attempts to create a better society by architects and planners who took their jobs very seriously. The problem, writes David Walters, was that we did not listen to what history had to teach us, and were so convinced we were right that we did not pay attention to what people in communities and neighbourhoods were telling us. This book makes efforts to avoid those mistakes.

The author is an English architect working in America. Designing Community places equal emphasis on 'design' and 'community', and uses comparative studies of British and American theory and practice to highlight issues facing urban designers today: the legacy of failed modernist architecture and planning concepts, the regeneration of cities, the battle against urban poverty and the crisis of affordable housing.

The book expounds the charrette format of public involvement in planning decisions. This is defined as 'intensive, inclusive workshops, lasting several days, that involve a

variety of professionals, elected officials and citizens from the community working together to hammer out concrete design proposals or master plans for future action'. The days of the detached expert handing down his plan to a grateful and awed public are long gone.

Form-based codes are also championed - even the best master plans are of little use without regulations to guide the future work of architects in designing buildings. In Britain, codes such as the Essex Design Guide for Residential Areas often led to great hostility from modernist architects as inhibitors of creativity. However the predominantly neo-vernacular, contextual aesthetic was welcomed in the market place, illustrating a gap that still exists between 'highbrow' professional tastes and 'middle-brow' popular preferences for residential design.

The author contends that 'traditional urbanism' provides the best armature for diverse and multicultural civic life to flourish - spaces such as the street, the square, the boulevard and the park fulfil this role because they are inherently humanistic in scale yet neutral and non-deterministic. Life still takes place on foot. Some designers, such as Rem Koolhaas, believe that modern transportation and the Internet have made traditional urban spaces obsolete. Others, including Bill Mitchell, argue that urban spaces will

retain their relevance in the Internet society specifically because people still care about meeting face-to-face and will always gravitate to places that offer cultural, urban, scenic or climatic attractions that cannot be experienced at the end of a wire and a computer screen.

Designing Community affirms the return to physical design as a core discipline of city planning. The book charts the transition away from the modernist doctrine of design-based 'blueprint' planning to postmodernist sensibilities of 'planning process over product', to the most extreme articulations of the postmodern critique, namely that planning is an impossible and illegitimate act in postmodern, post-industrial urban conditions. To counter this nihilism, the book examines urban design theories that support a reintegration of urban design at the forefront of new planning practice. It is an interesting attempt to mediate between modernism and postmodernism, and continues the never-ending dialogue between the two paradigms.

This is a book for architects, landscape architects, planners and students of all professions. It aims to show architects and landscape architects how public policy and the theory-based content of planning should govern their work as urban designers, and to show planners how urban design is once again central to their profession.

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