

RAYMOND UNWIN: Garden Cities And Town Planning

by Mervyn Miller, Leicester University Press (1992), 299 pages, £42.50

This is a fascinating kind of book that it is hard to imagine buying, at a price of 14 pence a page, yet which throws some interesting lights on why the Suburb is the way it is, and also on one of the great pioneers of British town planning.

Growing up as a Christian Socialist in the North, Raymond Unwin studied engineering at Oxford. It was after meeting the "aesthetic Barry Parker", whose sister he married, that he set up the partnership through which he was able to put his ideals into practice; their first commission of real importance being to design New Earswick for the Joseph Rowntree Village Trust in 1901. Shortly afterwards the firm was appointed to draw up the master plan for Letchworth, a job incidentally that took five weeks in contrast to the years that a major scheme takes today. These credentials made him Henrietta Barnett's natural choice for Hampstead Garden Suburb; reading one of his pamphlets on the train, she said, "That's the man for my beautiful green golden scheme."

The basic plan for the Suburb grew out of Unwin's principles, which had been formed at the feet of William Morris, John Ruskin and Ebenezer Howard. Viewing the city as somewhat wicked, and the suburb as mean and boring, Ebenezer Howard's original idea was to combine the merits of the two in a largely self-sufficient "garden city". Henrietta Barnett was stirred into action by hearing that the Underground was to be extended to Hampstead (the Bull and Bush), thus opening up the prospect of developing what had been farming land as speculative housing. To combat this, she set up a company to acquire what is now the Heath Extension as public open space in return for building on 75 per cent of the land, a great advance on normal practice. However, she wanted to go further by building somewhere beautiful that would improve the lives of the working classes.

Mrs Barnett's collaborators tended to lack her idealism and vision. As Mervyn Miller explains, once people like Liberal MP Henry Vivian, who ran Co-Partnership Tenants Ltd, gained control, many of the social benefits were sacrificed in the name of expediency. Nevertheless, her concern to create a beautiful landscape, and what were called "street pictures" predominated, and it is Raymond

Unwin we should thank (or blame, as many taxi drivers must think) for the picturesque layout.

Unwin's principles were set out in some 110 pamphlets, articles and books, which are liberally quoted by Mervyn Miller. They start with the idea of creating a contained place, hence the Great Wall and the entrance blocks in Hampstead Way were borrowed from Germany. Light carriageways with green borders replaced wide roads, saving money. The low density of some eight houses to the acre was intended not only to allow the artisans to grow much of their food, but also to produce a more economical form of development. This principle, which was set out in Unwin's influential pamphlet, *Nothing to be Gained from Overcrowding*, in fact, as Mervyn Miller points out, rests on some miscalculations. Street pictures were created by set backs and splayed junctions, allowing the houses themselves to be simple and therefore economic boxes for the most part. Cross subsidy was used to produce affordable housing. Lutyens was then employed to set the tone for the central area. I personally regret that Lutyens was allowed to dominate, as we find Unwin proposing shops at the centre, and a less imposing layout, but Lutyens was set on grander things. Unwin's philosophy was that of "assembling and marshalling many parts, as to procure a healthy, convenient and beautiful city". This included specifying organic elements like ponds and open spaces which have unfortunately given way to housing.

Unwin comes across as a great polymath. He was involved in plans all over the country, and one of the pleasures of the book is to see how far his influence spread, including the USA. He provided the model for the planners who went on to plan places like the London County Council Becontree and St Helier estates, and many less successful places, like Speke in Liverpool. He then left private practice to work as a civil servant, overseeing the massive post-First World War public housing

programme to provide "homes fit for heroes". Housing manuals with standard house types became the norm. Economies then led to leaving out the linking walls, resulting in what epitomises the 20th century house, the "semi-detached by-pass variegated". Unwin tried to innovate, for example by favouring the Building Guilds, but failed.

In 1929, having retired from the Civil Service, Unwin accepted an appointment as Technical Adviser to the Greater London Regional Planning Committee. He undoubtedly influenced the thinking that led to the Green Belt, and the attempt to stop "ribbon development". Yet reading the book, with its comparisons with the German system where planning was mandatory, one is left with the feeling that Unwin personified the fate of the Hampstead intellectual - politically correct, eating mainly vegetarian food and contributing to endless causes, and but in effect being a pawn in a much larger game that he perhaps never quite understood.

Unwin may have "reshaped the profession to serve twentieth-century needs" and his singleness of purpose and selflessness are still qualities that planning students would do well to acquire. Yet he may also have given intellectual respectability to the trends started by the Victorians of focusing on the home and garden and neglecting the community or street, aspects of a city that give concentrations of people their special value. Maxwell Fry is quoted as saying: "Unwin, more than any other single man, turned the soulless English byelaw street towards light, air, trees and flowers. 'The questions this raises is whether we have become too concerned about prettiness, at the expense of qualities like community and vitality."

Mervyn Miller does not raise these ethical issues, and his book reads rather like the doctoral thesis it stemmed from, full of references and notes. It is also a pity that there is not more insight into the man and how he lived. Perhaps this may come out when Miller's book on the Suburb, with Stuart Gray, is published, as it is the inter-relationship of all the "architects" of the suburbs which would perhaps provide the more popular book (provided the price is right). However to compensate there are plenty of eloquent quotes, including interviews with his children. For those interested in the man, Frank Jackson's *Sir Raymond Unwin, Architect, Planner and Visionary* (Zwemmer, £15.95) is the better read.

Miller points out that if Unwin's densities had been followed elsewhere, the radius of the developed area of London would have virtually doubled to 11½ miles to house a population of 8 million. With today's increasing interest in the idea of "urban villages" and encouraging people to live in cities again, the time has surely come for a proper evaluation of how well Hampstead Garden Suburb meets the needs of different groups, and what gives the place its "magic" quality. Perhaps it is also time to create a memorial to Unwin by redesigning Central Square as he and Henrietta Barnett would have liked it to be?

Dr Nicholas Falk has lived on the Suburb for the past three years and is involved in planning urban regeneration and local economic development in places as varied as Bucharest, Bradford and Margate.



Launch of the Dollis Valley Green walk.

ANOTHER BARNET CONSULTATION MEETING

RA and Trust representatives met Council members and officers of LB Barnet again in May to discuss various matters relating to the Suburb Conservation Area. The Council promised action on many points, to be monitored and reviewed at the meeting planned for September. On TREES, it was agreed that Barnet would give earlier notice of planting and tree management activities and the issue of the single pink tree in Heathgate was discussed. Residents raised various concerns about OPEN SPACES; the apparent inadequacy of the gardening contract, condition of Mutton Brook (mainly the National Rivers Authority), unrepaired memorial benches, Northway toilets and the flower beds where Rotherwick Road emerges into Finchley Road; experiments would also be made with surrounds to street trees. The RECYCLING PLAN that the Council is now obliged by legislation to prepare after it had been sent to the Secretary of State for the

Environment in August. The Council was proposing to contact various organisations with a view to offering glass recycling bins to be kept on their premises, payment being made for the glass collected.

The effectiveness of the new STREET CLEANING contract was to be monitored jointly with the Council after a survey by the RA's Litter Free Zone organiser, Peter Loyd, had shown up some inadequacies; and sponsorship of litter bins was being pursued, the RA and Trust views on the bin design being sought. The REFUSE COLLECTION arrangements at bank holidays was being rethought, with the Council agreeing that if a round was missed, Tylers would be told to collect additional bags left beside bins; and bags would be tried anyhow in Eastholm and Westholm, where the collection vehicle had difficulty in entering because of the parked cars. The Council was recommending various minor INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS and would also endeavour to replace missing

street nameplates more promptly. New legislation would be in place by January 1993 to enable the Council to deal with burglar alarm NOISE, which would be publicised. On TRAFFIC, the Council was looking at the problems of the Holms; a list of road and footpath repairs would be provided to the RA; traffic calming was to be further discussed with residents' representatives; and suggestions were sought for ideas for the Ward Initiatives Scheme, ie for spending £10,000 on two or three small improvements in the Suburb. The Council action on various PLANNING problems was explained, namely abuse of conditions of planning applications in the Market Place and the redevelopment of Mendel's Garage in Corringway. A good deal of useful ground was covered in a meeting that lasted nearly three hours and was well run by Phil Skinner, Barnet's Head of Engineering; everyone had their say, and progress was kept going on the agenda.

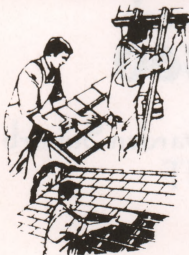
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