

Why are garden villages in the news?

Think piece

*Susan Parham
January 2017*

So what's special about garden villages?

As a new round of 'garden cities' starts to take shape in the United Kingdom, there has also been growing interest in 'garden villages' as a possible place-shaping form to help meet our need for new settlements in a sustainable and appealing way. The government has just announced (2 January 2017) some fourteen new such villages to be built in places around the country of which more later in this piece. Of course this begs the question: what are 'garden villages'? And is the thinking right that they can be part of a place-making solution for the United Kingdom? To explore those questions I am going to start by looking at what we might define as a 'garden village' and then turn to more about why garden villages are very much in the news.

Did our heritage of model and garden villages influence today's perspectives?

This is not a new concept or settlement reality. The United Kingdom has a long and fascinating history of settlements with connections to the idea of 'garden villages'. These places have been developed as models of good place-making by enlightened industrialists to house their workers; include examples of utopian settlements like Robert Owen's New Lanark in 1786; encompass a series of model villages for coalminers, like Creswell, New Bolsover and Woodlands; and even represent a few very early examples developed by landed estates for agricultural labourers. Thus, places such as Bournville model village developed in the 1890s/1900s near Birmingham by George Cadbury; Port Sunlight on the Wirral started in 1899 by the Levers; Saltaire by Titus Salt in 1851 and New Earswick by Joseph Rowntree from 1902 (both places in Yorkshire), are all justly famous 'villages of vision' in Gillian Darnley's (1978) notable phrase, drawn from her terrific book of the same name.

More recent developments explicitly called garden villages can be found from the early part of the twentieth century, including in places like the Summergangs area of Kingston upon Hull. Here the garden village was built around 1908 by Reckitts (of starch and laundry products fame) for their workers through the Hull Garden Village Company and was consciously influenced by the garden cities movement in social, architectural and layout terms. Similarly, places including Wrexham's Garden Village had direct garden city principles connections although was laid out at a smaller scale and with more of a suburban cast to its design.

Interesting mid-twentieth century examples include the Merville Garden Village built on the edge of Belfast in 1947-48 as one of the developments of Thomas McGrath, a builder who started the Ulster Garden Village Company in 1946. These Northern Ireland examples reflected garden city rather than new town principles in their design and architecture.

The Mitcham Garden Village in Surrey meanwhile was rather different. It was established as a charitable concern and opened in 1930 to provide housing for elderly people; a purpose it continues today. It is designed as a 'village' with vernacular materials in its domestic architecture and a focus on a kind of village green, but is still essentially a housing development in a suburban mode.

In fact historically what most garden villages shared, whether charitable concerns or developed by private companies of various kinds, was that they were effectively dormitory

areas of larger towns and cities or 'company' villages beholden to one major owner. Academic experts on garden cities have sometimes taken the view that the garden village or garden suburb mostly represented a case of a diminishment or distortion of garden city ideals. This was because such villages or suburbs often were not based on Howard's value capture and land stewardship model, were generally single land use (housing) rather than allowing the development of a complete place; and often did not sufficiently have a focus on improving the health and life opportunities of people who were poor or suffering bad living conditions.

So where does that leave the idea (and reality) of the garden village today?

Concepts with connections to the garden village have been revived in a number of ways over the last twenty years; well before the explicit focus on 'garden villages' as part of new garden settlements hit the news recently. For instance the 'urban village' concept that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s through the Urban Village Group among others had at its heart the idea that urban villages could be the basis for shaping places in the United Kingdom. This would be especially the case for reviving areas as part of urban regeneration efforts, replacing bland, characterless, zoned and single land use dominated places. These urban villages would – broadly – be places that had diverse, mixed land uses; be reasonably densely developed; be public spaced focused; and pedestrian friendly. If you look at academic work on 'urban villages' from the 1990s and early 2000s when these ideas and urban village inspired developments were most influential you can see they had a mixed reception. This is foreshadowed in an interesting article by Mike Biddulph, Malcolm Tait and Bridget Franklin that posited itself as an ['obituary'](#) for the urban village.

Work I have been close to through [The Herts Guide to Growth \(2008\)](#) written by Andres Duany and based on a big 'charrette' type consultation process in Hertfordshire shows how an urban village model works in place-shaping terms (see Image 1). This argues very cogently for an urban village model as a basis for good quality development. My co-author James Hulme and I reminded people about this in our more recent research, [The Herts Guide to Growth - Five Years On \(2013\)](#), suggesting the urban village model still made sense as a way to help make places socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and liveable. Reviewing development in Hertfordshire in the five years since the original document was released, we judged that 'Much of the current good practice within the county can be seen to owe a debt to the Hertfordshire Guide to Growth's urban village model' (Parham and Hulme, 2014: 26).

But how far do new 'garden village proposals reflect these urban village principles?

Among my questions now are whether new garden villages are just housing-only developments dressed up with a new name? And can they help fix the argued housing crisis in the UK? To try to get a bit clearer about that, let's look at the policy and advocacy documents that are floating around and then at a couple of examples from practice. In a [commended entry](#) for the 2014 Wolfson Prize on making new garden cities today, my fellow authors Anthony Downs, Gavin Murray (with visuals drawn up by Pablo Fernandez) and I argued that we have the opportunity to develop a number of different forms of garden settlements including garden suburbs and garden villages. We argued that place-making principles stemming from the urban village model were still very meaningful and we contrasted such '21st century' urbanism, including garden inspired approaches, to the problems we saw as inherent in '20th century urbanism' (see Image 2). We also noted some good specific examples of garden villages in planning stages in Hertfordshire and I will return to that below.

In 2015, the think tank, Policy Exchange, released a report written by Matthew Taylor about [garden villages](#) in 2015; and its editor, Chris Walker argued at the time that garden villages could help solve the housing crisis: 'Our report Garden Villages recommends a network of new village communities in predominantly rural areas to help solve the housing crisis. It suggests that if each and every one of the 200 mainly rural councils built a new garden village,

then a million homes could be built in England over 10 years – many affordable.' The report was pretty clear on what a village would expect to contain in 'catchment' terms:

'A community of 1,500 homes would typically be a village built around a hub of primary school, sports hub, and local centre with household recycling facilities. It would hope to attract a café/small shops/a post office; with some live/work opportunities too, but it will clearly function in relation to nearby larger settlements for facilities like hospital healthcare, main retail shopping, etc.' (Taylor and Walker, 2015: 32).

It also advocated for land value capture (as at Letchworth) which as we know is fundamental to the robust future of the garden city. And it took the view that lots of smaller developments that were locally led and advocated could get us the same scale of place making results (and much needed housing starts) but in a better way than trying to do a few large, top down and highly unpopular ones. In other words: 'Create communities at a small scale but in sufficient numbers that allows a rapid increase in housing delivery without the huge upfront infrastructure and delivery issues of very large new communities (Taylor and Walker, 2015: 36).

Private sector developers around the UK are already master-planning, designing and starting to build garden villages. In a recent paper, *Garden Cities – Why Not?*, my co-author, Keith Boyfield and I pointed to garden village examples 'of place-making from Hertfordshire to Wales to Cornwall to Aberdeenshire that we think are very much in sympathy with Garden City principles. What is more, they show that enlightened landowners and developers can get on with the job of building new urban extensions, towns and villages of exceptional quality and livability. Furthermore, there is plenty of opportunity for developing variations on the Garden City model, depending on circumstances. Cities, towns, villages and reconfigured suburbs could all be part of the mix.'

So where to next for garden villages?

To return to where I started with this think piece, there is already quite a lot happening in relation to garden villages. National government has just announced plans for various groups to build at least 48,000 homes in garden village developments around the country. This was foreshadowed by the release in March 2016 of a government [Prospectus](#) seeking proposals for locally led garden villages, towns and cities. In this it defined garden villages as being between 1,500 and 10,000 homes and configured as discrete settlements rather than the extension of existing towns or villages (Prospectus, 2016: 7). As of March 2016 it didn't have one defined model for development in mind but said that the garden village must respond to local housing need, where possible make use of local brownfield land; show how infrastructure would be developed; and be led by local authorities, while support from private sector players including developers was encouraged. It would need to be 'well designed, built to a high quality and attractive' although what kinds of designs might meet any of these criteria was not made clear.

Then for the urban villages announced in January 2017 the government has said that:

In an expansion of the existing garden towns programme, these smaller projects of between 1,500 and 10,000 homes continue the government's commitment to support locally-led development and make sure this is a country that works for everyone.

The 14 new garden villages – from Devon to Derbyshire, Cornwall to Cumbria – will have access to a £6 million fund over the next 2 financial years to support the delivery of these new projects ([Gov.uk, 2 January, 2017](#)).

According to the government's website [announcement](#) the fourteen garden villages are in the following places:

- Long Marston in Stratford-on-Avon
- Oxfordshire Cotswold in West Oxfordshire
- Deenethorpe in East Northants
- Culm in Mid Devon
- Welborne near Fareham in Hampshire
- West Carclaze in Cornwall
- Dunton Hills near Brentwood, Essex
- Spitalgate Heath in South Kesteven, Lincolnshire
- Halsnead in Knowsley, Merseyside
- Longcross in Runnymede and Surrey Heath
- Bailrigg in Lancaster
- Infinity Garden Village in South Derbyshire and Derby City area
- St Cuthberts near Carlisle City, Cumbria
- North Cheshire in Cheshire East

Reporting on this move [The Guardian](#) notes that 'Sites for new villages include green belt land and spread from Cornwall to Cumbria, but local opposition is strong in some areas'. It cites concerns relating to individual village proposals including the proportion of affordable housing, location on green belt, that it is actually top down development rather than locally led, potential pressure on infrastructure, and fears that local villages and hamlets would be swallowed up. Notwithstanding these proffered anxieties in relation to specific schemes, as I read it, the coverage in the media has been largely positive or at least taking an implied 'let's wait and see how well it goes' tone.

For me there are specific place making issues this might help with. One example is about accessibility. If we generate more movements by car by doing 'business as usual' suburban development that won't really help us become more sustainable in urban terms as a country, so really good planning to make it as easy as possible to cycle and walk and to focus on live-work opportunities in villages as well as local food growing, shopping and services will all be critical. Villages near rail lines and good bus routes might help and perhaps this is a way to help reopen some rail lines closed in the Beeching era? I would very much like to see that happen.

Summing up

So to sum up, it seems to me very likely that the new garden villages already announced – and possibly more to come – can add to our stock of new places in rural and semi-rural locations in a small scale but cumulatively substantial way that is likely to be judged more acceptable and less intrusive than bigger developments. 48,000 new homes is not an enormous number when you look at the scale of the unmet housing needs we seem to have but it will make a contribution and possibly an increasing one if this tranche of schemes goes well (and other well design schemes come to fruition). Good design and place-making, as much value capture as possible, and engaging with people to maximise local acceptability, all seem to me to be really crucial elements to making these garden villages work well and be acceptable to people. One measure of this will be how far garden villages really stick to garden city principles – these are as pertinent as ever.