

The View From Rome

Steven W. Semes



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The Garden City in Italy and Abroad: From England and America to Italy

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An invitation to speak at a conference here in Rome offered a long-overdue opportunity to re-examine a pattern of urban development that is humane, dignified, sustainable, healthy, and economically feasible, even if it is, at the moment, almost entirely absent from contemporary practice of urbanism.



Country Club Prado Entrance, Coral Gables, Florida. This planned suburb adjacent to Miami was designed in the early 1920s as a fantasy of the Mediterranean set in the sub-tropics. Public gardens and other amenities made the town especially attractive in the competitive real estate market of the Florida Land Boom. Developer George Merrick's architects brought aspects of Italian architecture and urbanism to Florida at the same time Gustavo Giovannoni was bringing English and American ideas about garden-cities to Italy - a timely and fascinating cultural exchange all but wiped out by modernism and World War II. All photos by the author.

The garden city was based on four principles: a built environment designed to promote health, urban development of limited size, a bounded community surrounded by natural landscape, and community ownership and management of the land. It is important to remember that a "garden-city" is properly set within and bounded by a garden or "green belt," not a city in which every house has a garden, as is sometimes thought. It is compact, limited in area, and bounded by zones in which development is prohibited. It also presupposes transit links to larger centers nearby where residents can find employment, recreational, and cultural opportunities. It is dense and polycentric, the opposite of suburban sprawl.

The movement was founded by an English social reformer, Ebenezer Howard, at the end of the 19th century. Along with many of his Victorian contemporaries, Howard saw the remedy for urban ills - overcrowding, disease, crime, unemployment, and environmental degradation - in a return to the healing properties of nature. Putting his ideas into practice, he founded Letchworth in 1903 with the architects Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, set in the rural landscape of North Hertfordshire, and with buildings in a mixture of English vernacular styles.

Welwyn was the second garden-city founded by Howard, in 1920. Here the plan was more informal, the center arranged around a formal public garden, the Parkway, but becoming less geometrical toward the periphery, and with the original architecture in the Georgian style. Welwyn was described by one writer as "a most English, arcadian vision of the future."

The garden city idea also took root in America around 1900: In the borough of Queens, New York, the Russell Sage Foundation created Forest Hills Gardens in 1905 to provide decent low-income housing. Architect Grosvenor Atterbury designed the town and its buildings and some of the more modest houses used a prefabricated building technique in which the house was composed of approximately 170 standardized precast concrete panels, fabricated off-site and positioned by crane. Despite these intentions, the properties proved too expensive for the originally-intended population and today the area remains an affluent enclave in economically and ethnically mixed Queens.

Atterbury's plan centers on a public square surrounded by mixed uses, including commercial stores, offices, an inn, and some larger apartment buildings. Streets lead off toward smaller individual houses surrounded by gardens. While the development of the city later engulfed the village, private associations and conservation regulations have preserved its original appearance.

A garden city of the early 1920s happens to be my hometown, Coral Gables, Florida. On the former site of the family's orange groves southwest of Miami, an extraordinary developer named George Merrick had the Romantic idea of a town combining Mediterranean architectural styles and a sub-tropical natural setting, even if the climate and landform of South Florida had little in common with the Mediterranean. Merrick sent his team of architects to Spain and Italy to gather inspiration for the public buildings, monumental gateways, apartment buildings and private houses. Lacking a "green belt" to separate the town from the areas outside, Merrick built elaborate entrances from the surrounding roads, and rather grand classical buildings rose in white stucco or clad in the local coral rock that resembles Roman travertine.

The original houses were modest in size, but included stucco exteriors, loggias, cotto floors, ironwork, beamed ceilings,



La Puerta del Sol, or the Douglas Entrance to Coral Gables, Florida. Merrick's architects (Denman Fink, Walter De Garmo, and Phineas Paist) designed a series of monumental entrances to the new town because the plan did not call for a "green belt" to act as a visible boundary between the new town and the adjacent city. The large archway over the street was a common feature of the "town squares" of numerous suburban towns of the teens and 1920s in both the U.S. and Italy.



Church of the Guardian Angels, Citta'-giardino Aniene, Rome. Designed by Gustavo Giovannoni 1920-24 as the terminus of the axis from the Via Nomentana connecting this new "garden-city" (which he master planned in 1920) with the center of Rome, the neo-Baroque church is still the landmark of Piazza Sempione, formerly the main square of the new town, sadly now largely a parking lot and bus depot awaiting a more dignified future. Like English and American examples, the streets fan out from this square and wind up the hill behind, lined with charming villini and private houses surrounded by gardens. Modern over-development has robbed the area of much of its charm.

barrel tile roofs, fountains, and pergolas. The verdant landscape soon enveloped the whole town in green. After World War II, modern buildings transformed the downtown and more conventional houses were built among those in the earlier Mediterranean styles, though in recent years there has been a renewed interest in the historic character and some new houses, more sympathetic in style, have been built.



Interior Courtyard, Perimeter Block Housing, Garbatella, Rome. Recently restored, this large complex of apartment buildings arranged around mid-block courtyards was a centerpiece of the first phase of Garbatella, a new town for industrial workers master-planned by Giovannoni in 1920. This building was designed by Plinio Marconi as public housing for the ICP, the agency established in 1907 by the progressive socialist mayor of Rome, Ernesto Nathan. Under fascism, Garbatella was transformed into something quite different from its English Garden City beginnings, though it has now become the "hot" neighborhood for Rome's hipsters.

All of these Anglo-Saxon developments were very well known to Gustavo Giovannoni, the leading Italian proponent of the garden city ideas. Giovannoni knew of Howard and Unwin's work first-hand from travel and correspondence. Throughout his career, he defended the social and cultural values of garden cities and historic centers, in contrast to the banal monumentalism of the fascist regime. He put his ideas into action through his master plans for two new developments on the outskirts of Rome, Città Giardino Aniene and Garbatella, both designed in 1920 - contemporary with Welwyn, Coral Gables, and numerous other similar plans, with which he was very familiar.

The plan for Città Giardino Aniene bears significant resemblance to Atterbury's for Forest Hills Gardens: the central piazza (with Giovannoni's beautiful Church of the Guardian Angels) contains a mix of civic, commercial and residential buildings, and streets radiate from the piazza, becoming progressively more informal and residential in character as they curve up the hill. All the original buildings reflected Giovannoni's preferred "vernacular baroque" manner but, sadly, post-war redevelopment and neglect have robbed the area of much of its original charm.

Garbatella, too, was planned originally as a direct recollection of the English garden cities, but in a style as Italian as Howard's towns were English. The *barocchetto romano*, as the style is known locally, reminds me of Coral Gables, under construction during the same years. The initial phase was modest but full of character and greenery, though the Fascist government that came to power in 1922 emphasized more intensive and rapid construction and, as a result, the original conception evolved in ways quite different from Giovannoni's intentions. Despite decades of neglect and decay, Garbatella is today one of the most popular districts of Rome, rapidly gentrifying as hipsters replace its original industrial-worker population.

After the Second World War, the pattern shifted from the garden city to suburban sprawl, in Italy as in the U.S., but many of the surviving garden cities remain beautiful and interesting places to live. Like the historic centers, they are attracting new residents. Demand for housing in both the historic centers and the garden cities has made them havens for those who can afford to live where they choose, while the rest of us have to settle for tract houses or concrete condos in the suburbs. Giovannoni recognized in the 1930s that the destinies of the centers and peripheries of our cities are tied together, and the stark contrast between them is a major source of gentrification and mass tourism.

Contemporary architects and planners are rediscovering the value of the garden city ideas today. Back in England, where the garden city idea began, Poundbury offers a successful alternative model to sprawl, with its walkable neighborhoods, natural setting, and new traditional architecture. In Italy, Pier Carlo Bontempi has designed a borgo in the Emilia countryside that includes houses, a hotel, a church, streets, and piazzas on a platform with parking below. On the Adriatic Coast, Luigi Del Sordo has completed a project for social housing that, while an infill rather than a town on its own, offers a model for further development, complete with community garden and vistas into the countryside. All of these examples give us hope for a rebirth of healthy and sustainable development

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