

BUILDING THE NEW JERUSALEM

Architecture, housing and politics 1900–1930

Mark Swenarton



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The accompanying CD contains scanned copies of the following documents.

- 1 Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, *The Art of Building a Home. A collection of lectures and illustrations* (1901)
- 2 Raymond Unwin, *Cottage Plans and Common Sense*. Fabian Tract 109, (1902)
- 3 Raymond Unwin, *Town Planning in Practice* (1909)
- 4 Raymond Unwin, *Nothing Gained by Overcrowding!* (1912)
- 5 Report of the Departmental Committee on Buildings for Small Holdings (1913)
- 6 Advisory Committee on Rural Cottages, *Plans, models, specifications, and methods of construction for rural cottages and outbuildings* (1915)
- 7 Tudor Walters Report, *Report of the Committee appointed by the President of the Local Government Board and the Secretary for Scotland to consider questions of building construction in connection with the provision of dwellings for the working classes in England and Wales, and Scotland* (1918)
- 8 Women's Housing Sub-committee, First interim report (1918). Final report (1919)
- 9 Clough Williams-Ellis, *Cottage Building in Cob, Pisé, Chalk and Clay: A Renaissance* (1919)
- 10 Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, *Experimental Cottages: A Report on the Work of the Department at Amesbury*. WR Jaggard (1921)
- 11 Ministry of Health, Standardisation and New Methods of Construction Committee, *Particulars of Systems of House Construction Approved up to April, 1920* (1920)
- 12 Building Research Board, Special Reports 1-8 (1921-7)
 - 1 *Sand-lime and Other Concrete Bricks*. HO Weller (1921)
 - 2 *Experiments on Floors* (1921)
 - 3 *The Stability of Thin Walls* (1921)
 - 4 *The Transmission of Heat and Gases Through, and the Condensation of Moisture on the Surface of, Wall Materials* (1921)
 - 5 *Building in Cob and Pisé de Terre* (1922)
 - 6 *A Graphical Cost Analysis of Cottage-building*. WH Wainwright (1922)
 - 7 *Heat Transmission Through Walls, Concretes and Plasters* (1923)
 - 8 *Fire Resistant Construction*. RE Stradling and FL Brady (1927)
- 13 Committee on New Methods of House Construction. Ministry of Health. First interim report (1924). Second Interim report (1925). Third interim report (1925)
- 14 RB White, *A Short History of Building Research in the United Kingdom from 1917 to 1946 – in particular that of the Building Research Station*. BRS Internal Note IN98/66 (1965)
- 15 Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, *Report of the Building Research Board for the period ended 31st December, 1926* (1927)
- 16 FM Lea, *Science and Building. A History of the Building Research Station* (1971)

Introduction

And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years.... And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven.

(Revelation, chapters 20–21)

The period 1900-1930 was the one in which the architecture, housing and politics of the modern world were formed. A time traveller from the twenty-first century arriving in 1900 Europe would find themselves in a foreign land: no political consensus over the state's responsibility for welfare; no widespread provision of social housing by the state; no 'modern architecture' in the form that we know today and no concept of housing as a major part of architecture. Wind the clock forward by 30 years and the landscape would be familiar: widespread state involvement in the provision of housing for the working class; social democracy established as one of (if not the) dominant political formations; a theory and practice of modern architecture that, in its essentials, is still with us today, with housing seen as a major component of the discipline of architecture.

Nor, of course, was it a coincidence that politics, housing and architecture alike were transformed in this period; on the contrary, the three were closely entwined. Housing was one of the main planks of social democratic politics (which in Britain meant Labour) and, in response, one of the areas in which anti-Labour political parties also wanted to make a mark. Architects saw in the advent of social democracy, with its state-funded programmes, both the opportunity and the necessity for a new kind of architecture, both as symbol and midwife of the new society emerging from the old. And it was through their claim to expertise in the design of housing for the working class – never before seen as a major area of architectural endeavour – that architects staked their claim to a leading role in the social democratic pageant.

Nor, equally, did the changes to our triad take place in isolation from the other changes – economic, technological, cultural – that were transforming the developed world at this time. The 'factory system', first identified as a phenomenon in Britain in the early nineteenth century, had matured and spread across the globe, generating not just the organised labour movement that was to provide the basis for social democratic politics but also the intense commercial competition between industrialised countries, notably Britain and its latter-day economic rival, Germany, that was to culminate in the outbreak of hostilities in 1914. But the kind of things that were being made, and the way that they



Fig. 1. Ford motor cars on the production line, c1912

were being made in factories, were also changing (Fig. 1). Thanks to its growing affluence, the working class was increasingly recognised as a consuming class; and fortunes were to be made on both sides of the Atlantic by those who, like Ford in America or Cadbury in Britain, perfected the methods of producing commodities for this new market, whether cars or chocolate. With these advances, many coming from the USA, there also arose new approaches to the organisation of production – scientific management, Taylorism, standardisation – which, at least until the USA lost its allure with the Wall Street crash in 1929, seemed to hold the key to improving efficiency and quality, and reducing costs. Nowhere was the appeal of this new approach greater than in relation to construction, with its hopelessly pre-scientific, ‘rule of thumb’ procedures and its chronic inability to deliver

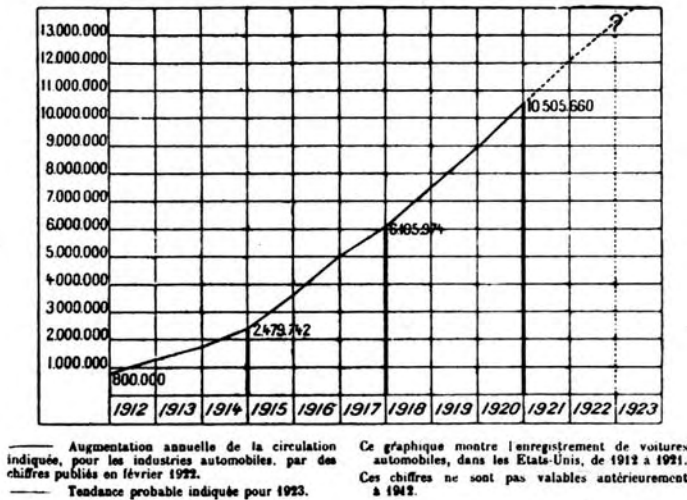


Fig. 2. Increase in automobile production in the USA since 1912 (from Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, 1925)

The model to which these governments overwhelmingly turned, was that developed in Britain in the decade or so before 1914 by the 'garden city movement', above all by Raymond Unwin. In an age when Fordism was entrancing the world – when every problem could be subjected to the scrutiny of 'the expert' – Unwin was, so far as housing was concerned, the expert's expert. Unwin had designed showpiece projects for each of the three strands that comprised the garden city movement – the 'industrial village' (Rowntree's New Earswick, York, 1902–), the 'garden city' (Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire, 1903–) and the 'garden suburb' (Hampstead Garden Suburb, London, 1905–); but it was with the garden suburb that he was most clearly associated and with which his theoretical work was primarily concerned. Whereas with the garden city Ebenezer Howard wanted to abandon the existing city and start from scratch in the agricultural countryside, Unwin's vision of the garden or satellite suburb started with the forces of suburbanisation that were already at work and sought to control them so as to produce a transformation in 'the dwellings and surroundings of the people' (Fig. 4).

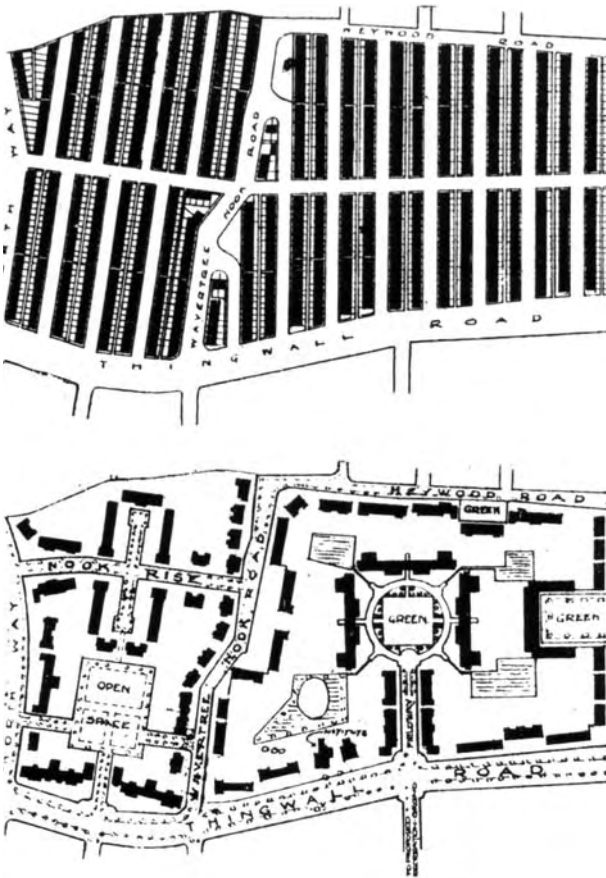


Fig. 4. Conventional versus garden city layout: Liverpool Garden Suburb, 1912, 'as it might have been' (top) and 'as it was'

Fig. 6. The largest municipal housing estate in the world: the London County Council's Becontree estate, commenced 1920



Fig. 7. Inter-war private enterprise housing in Romford, Essex



pay for the peace – and whose opposition in 1921 brought the housing programme to a premature halt. The advent of the first Labour government in 1924, however, re-activated the municipal housing programme and when the Conservatives – keenly aware of the need to offer social reform if they were not to lose out to Labour – returned to power, they decided to retain it, albeit with the proviso that the Building Research Station should seek a novel and cheaper form of construction for social housing. The outcome across Britain in the 1920s was the construction of low-density cottage estates designed according to (an inevitably pared-down version of) Unwin's precepts and often built of concrete or steel rather than brick (Fig. 6).

The local authority estates, however, were not the only ones built on Unwin's model. The great forces of free-market suburbanisation which Unwin had sought to reform proved themselves more amenable to change – albeit of course on their own terms – than he could have imagined or, in the form in which it turned out, than he would have wished. Speculative builders, whom Unwin in the 1900s had berated for building an unacceptable form of housing, were also persuaded, if not by the arguments, at least by the authority of the Tudor Walters Report and adopted Unwin's low density method, albeit with the design subtleties, as well as the social programme, largely omitted (Fig. 7). The upshot was that the kind of low-density perimeter block layout that Unwin had pioneered for the pre-war garden city movement as a radical break with convention had itself become,

Building the New Jerusalem explores a fascinating and formative period in our thinking about modern housing, and especially its design and technology. It subverts, supplements, and surprises at every turn.

Richard Harris, McMaster University

Mark Swenarton shows how our small island provided the housing vanguard for the most exciting and challenging visions of building many Utopias in the twentieth century.

Anne Power, London School of Economics

This superbly researched book challenges the conventional history of modern architecture by putting Britain's garden city and social housing movements at its origins.

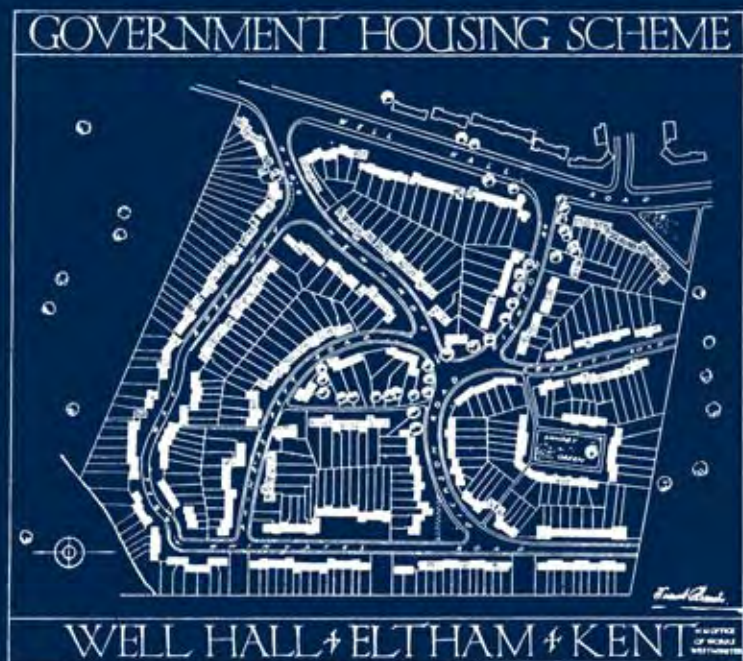
Robert Fishman, University of Michigan

This thought-provoking collection of essays and documents will be indispensable for all researchers in the area, whether from a perspective of history, architecture or social policy.

Alison Ravetz, Leeds Metropolitan University

In this provocative collection of essays, Mark Swenarton narrates a story around the international influence of British architects and urbanists. He reminds readers that modern architecture in Britain was a social and political concern, not merely an aesthetic style.

M Christine Boyer, Princeton University



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