The Garden City and the American Dream

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Abstract

Howard's Garden city tradition is central in American urban planning and it has had great influence, also in its interpretations that were most distant from the original utopian model, on the ways in which the American city has grown. The approach defined by Howard rejected the English industrial city of the 19th century and proposed a model based on the values of local communities. The American translation of this approach has had great success and has brought after the second world war to the creation of suburbia, i.e. to a gradual process of suburbanization of the nation. This article sets out to investigate the evolution of the application of Howard's model, the ways in which this model has had an impact on the growth of the American city and the reasons that have determined its success among planners, architects and other decision-makers throughout the 20th century.

Keywords: Garden city, Howard, suburbia, American dream, Anti-urbanism.

1. Background

This article aims to investigate the evolution of the application of Howard's Garden city principles in American urban planning, the ways in which the American city has grown, and the reasons that determined the success of a model that, starting from the observation of the living conditions of the poor working-class Londoners at the end of the 19th century, proposed a repopulation of the countryside to curb the urban growth of the city (Grant, 2006). After the first virtuous applications, the Garden city model influenced the development of the suburbs of American cities and orthodox urban planning after the Second World War, creating isolation, standardization, homologation and in some cases social degradation (Piselli, 2009). Almost throughout the whole twentieth century, the garden city was at the basis of the theories of American urban planning, although the practice progressively distanced itself from the original ideal (Grant, 2006; Zuddas, 2019). The motivations behind Howard's utopia success in American culture can be traced back to the pressure of the Protestant culture, the American dream and the anti-urban

ideology that shaped the American city, that is the epitome, symbol and field of expression of that dream. Through a diachronic analysis of what is called American exceptionalism, or of the motivations that make the US city different from the old European world (Bergamini, 2012), and the role played in this evolutionary process by the success of the Garden City model, we want to show how the aspiration to a life in contact with nature, which initially coincided with a desire for differentiation from the mass reserved for the elite, already translates from the second half of the twentieth century into a suburbanization of the nation (Zukin, 1982). The consequence, which is arguably more visible today than it was in the past, was the homologation of individuals' lifestyles, aspirations and consumption, despite the fact that, for some decades, the first attempts by the new suburban inhabitants to negotiate and hybridize spaces are starting to be observed.

The suburb, in fact, is the landscape in which American dreams, promises and ambitions have progressively settled since the beginning of the 19th century with the first isolated experiments aimed at creating new communities, to then pass also through the real estate investments in systematic projects that have enjoyed first the support of local governments, and subsequently the role played by the federal government.

The American dream – defined for the first time by Truslow Adams in *American Dreams* (1933) – is rooted in the suburban development patterns and identified in the home – and not in the model neighbourhoods or in the ideal city –, in family values, in the ideology of female domesticity its main archetypes (Cullen, 2003). In the 1940s, General Electric in one of its commercials advertised the purchase of a house as "an adventure in happiness". The promise that happiness could be found in the ideal home convinced millions of Americans to move to the suburbs in single-family houses, despite the fact that they were places that in most cases caused the physical and social isolation of those who lived there (Archer, 2005).

Indeed, already in 1945, Sartre, speaking of American cities, had highlighted the differences compared to European cities, observing that they were cities that constituted a

moving landscape for its inhabitants, whereas our [European] cities are our shells. […] We Europeans change within changeless cities, and our houses and neighbourhoods outlive us; American cities change faster than their inhabitants do, and it is the inhabitants who outlive

the cities. [...] For us a city is, above all, a past, for them it is mainly a future; what they like in the city is everything it has not yet become and everything it can be(1971, pp. 197-205).

Sartre, although he did not share the country's socio-political reality, argued that American cities were a place of reinvention, of continuous experimentation in the ways in which a society can organize itself spatially. This tension shapes the American dream in its various forms – of life, of an upwardly mobile society, of the myth of home ownership, of the exaltation of romantic derivation of contact with nature – which still remains firm today in American culture although it has changed shape over time and has revealed all its limitations. Moreover, individuals have always used ways to identify themselves (for example, religion, language, collective memory, geography, etc.) and the United States has created a collective imaginary" inspired by this to respond to this need, the existence of a purportedly New World, realized in a Revolution that began with an explicitly articulated Declaration, and consolidated in the writing of a durable Constitution"(Cullen, 2003, p. 6). In a country built on massive migratory flows from all over the world the American dream quickly became a lingua franca that everyone could understand.

Two main factors contributed to the construction of the American dream, namely: Rousseau's anti-urban and naturalistic ideology that saw the city as a chance of intellectual success, but also of moral corruption and degeneration of humanity, as well as the Puritan model through its ability to play not only a religious, but also a political and social role. Suffice it to think of the metaphor of the *City upon a Hill* mentioned by Winthrop in 1630, referring to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, urging the Puritan settlers to have the necessary courage to build a city governed by divine law that would represent a beacon for the rest of the world. The myth of the city on the hill represented an example of Christian charity and radical renewal of humanity and has shaped the American imaginary, becoming an essential cultural reference and one of the most long-lived American political rhetorics (Moschini, 2007). Moreover, at the centre of the radial structure of the Puritan urban model, inherited from the Baroque, the Church was located so that it could be seen by everyone, thus exercising its moralizing function and strengthening mutual social control within the community. The influence of the Puritan model has been a long-lived constant in American culture. Miller in *The crucible* will also talk about paranoia,

hysteria and rigid Puritan morality in the cities of New England in the seventeenth century, using the Salem witch trials as a metaphor against McCarthyism. The original model then lost its mystical religious dimension to become political strategy when Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) identified the inalienable human rights, inspired by Locke's thought, in life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. And it is precisely on the right to the pursuit of happiness that the myth of a society full of dreams and aspirations is based.

The house, or more generally the architectural plan, becomes the metaphor of a socio-political project based on an anti-urbanism deeply rooted in American culture (Rohe, Watson, 2007). Already Jefferson in 1784 had written a strong anti-urban invective in the *Notes on the States of Virginia* stressing that "the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor" (1829, p. 173). An idea of society, government and cities that will shape American culture and will lead Gallup to note, about two hundred years later, that less than 20% of the American population expressed a desire to live in the city (Katz, 1994).

2. The reasons for the success of the Garden-city style

The Garden City, a utopia that closes the nineteenth century and influences much of the twentieth century, bases its success, as already anticipated, on the close relationship between Protestant culture, the American dream and anti-urban ideology, but also on its ability to reconcile the values of local communities with territorial governance strategies. Howard's utopia immediately showed his ability to translate into real design, and was to inspire generations of planners and architects (Hall and Ward, 2014). Mumford was also to move along this line, presenting the cities as a set of disasters that produced profoundly negative effects and suggesting the tradition of the Anglo-American Garden city and the thought of Howard and Geddes as the only alternative to the anti-city of the mass suburbs (Talen, 2005). At the same time, the strong interests of the real estate market towards the growing middle class led local governments, eager to regulate this slice of the market and to derive a political benefit

from it, to transform the principles of the Garden city into rules of urban and suburban development.

In fact, the United States was the place where most of the literary and real utopian cities found their space, probably also because of the strong symbolic charge that the creation of a new social structure possessed in the New World territories where there was no weight of the past, or of confrontation. The United States ended up becoming the *topos* par excellence of anti-urban utopias. Edward Bellamy would set his industrial utopia *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* in Boston in 2000, which expressed its greatest appeal in the bucolic part, and Jules Verne would choose the United States to build his own utopian city, Franceville de *Les 500 millions de la Bégum*, a thriving garden that prospers in harmony with nature.

The roots of anti-urban ideology in American culture are ancient and are based on the belief that the city is the place of evil, degradation and corruption. The Protestant derivation of this model is easily traceable in the sentiments it expressed (piety, charity, stereotyping of family values, etc.) and in the production of an imaginary of religious origin. In the nineteenth century the anti-urban ideology was also fuelled by the results of the research by Malthus, Engels and Booth on the conditions of the poor classes and on the unlivable nature of London. A catastrophic and crisis vision of the city that is based on a feeling of fear of modernity and to which Owen, Fourier and Howard will try to give a possible solution by proposing forms of alternative urban settlement, whose utopian message will also be collected in part by the subsequent Modern Movement (Sgroi, 2001).

The idea of a green city becomes one of the ideological cornerstones of 19th-century American urban planning. The cultural references of this model are found in the Park Movement which structured the urban space in connection with parks and parkways, in the City Beautiful ideology, introduced at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, which was based on the conviction of the superiority of the European archetypes and on their ability to affect American culture positively, and the influence of Howard's Garden City, which claimed the utopia of a city inspired by community values, the individual right to property of the house and collective spaces green and which would quickly take root in the first two decades of the 20th century.

Even though skyscrapers were built in the American metropolises and the processes of productive concentration and urban growth were very

rapid, the essence of American culture was already deeply anti-urban and the cities had become the field in which to place an abstract debate on the virtues of the nation and on the corruption that went through it. So while the American city in the nineteenth century feeds, and is in turn fed by, the American dream of wealth and success – above all through the real estate market – at the same time, it is the place where the original values of the nation are irreparably corrupted.

In the years following the Second World War, the paradox of economic growth emerges that is not accompanied by a golden age in American cities. The bias that characterizes American urban history was denounced in 1962 by Morton and Lucia White who in *The Intellectual versus the City* retraced the evolution of anti-urban ideas during the nineteenth and up to the mid-twentieth century. "The decay of the American City is now one of the most pressing concerns of the nation" (White, 1962, p. 11). This is how the White volume begins, revealing all the concerns related to the physical and social dimension of American cities in the 1960s, the failure of renewal programmes and the spread of demonstrations for civil and anti-war rights. The anti-urban tradition still lives on in American culture even in the contemporary era. According to Conn, anti-urbanism remains deeply rooted in American culture despite a renewed interest in city life. The motivation must be sought in the prevalence in American culture of feelings of individualism and self-sufficiency and in the rejection of the principle of responsibility towards common good which is instead the essence of urban culture (Conn, 2014). Clearly this statement does not exclude the presence of communitarian living experiments, but highlights what can be considered a general trend. At the same time, contemporary American culture expresses all its contradictions even in the suburbs that, if, on the one hand, they continue to represent the place where the aspirations of American life converge, on the other, they also begin to express the anxieties and disillusionment of those who have lived the betrayal of a dream. After all, the myth of the American dream was never founded on the assurance that every dream would necessarily become reality, but, rather, that the dream is always allowed and that, above all, it acts as a relevant motivational mass factor. One should also be mindful that the massive suburbanization and the mass production strategies applied to the real estate sector, that were typical of the post-2nd world war period, had their origin in Levittown, the project started by Levitt and Sons in 1947

in Long Island, that represents much more than a tribute to the American dream or to conformity and to the lack of identity that derived from them. The basic idea of the "General Motors of the housing industry", as Levitt defined it, was to offer a housing solution to the young soldiers returning from the war who had got married and had kick started the baby boom in a nation that was severely lacking housing. Levitt's project offered standardized products and materials as well an aesthetic uniformity that varied only in terms of colours or fittings. It was the inhabitants who then customized their homes according to the standards of Cape Cod design or following the subsequent models, Colonial Rancher and Country Clubber (Gans, 1967; Ippolito, 2009). Levittown was for decades a community with an exclusively white population (today the white population is still 75%, according to the 2017 US Census data). So while Levitt promoted his product as "the best house in the US", Mumford described Levittown as a "uniform environment from which escape is impossible", laying bare that it was a private housing project, that was later repeated with the same name in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Puerto Rico, that contributed to reducing the American cities in the second half of the 20th century to little more than office building conglomerates.

3. Anti-urban Utopias: Howard's Garden City

In 1898 Howard published *Tomorrow. A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* – republished in 1902 with the title *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* – which represents the manifesto of a movement for planning a new town, influenced by Ruskin's aesthetic and philosophical criticisms, and which would be the utopia that would close the 19th century(Parker, 2004).Howard's idea certainly had a greater influence in the American experience than the City Beautiful movement that since 1893 promoted beauty as a catalyst that could promote moral and civic virtues in urban populations and more broadly improve quality of life. To its detractors, on the contrary, the movement seemed too preoccupied with aesthetics compared with social reforms. Even though Jane Jacobs defined it as the expression of the "cult of architectural design", the pattern of the City Beautiful movement, inspired by the baroque city, could spread thanks to Burnham in San Francisco's designs after the 1906 fire, those of Chicago

and many other cities (Columbus, Ohio, Philadelphia, etc.). If, then, the City Beautiful movement can rightly be considered one of the main urban design movements of the 20th century, the other certainly was the Garden city movement. Its theoretician Howard describes the Garden city in detail in its dimensions, in the form, in the location of the public buildings, in the avenues that cross the city and in the central park around which the Crystal Palace develops, a gallery that must welcome the inhabitants when the weather does not allow park attendance (Saragosa, 2011). A greenbelt surrounds the city, constituting the limit of the urban fabric and, at the same time, fulfilling the task of providing for food production (Belfiore, 2005). Howard's utopia aims not only to eliminate the evils of urban planning but tries to imagine a better society and a city inspired by community principles, but not collectivist. The city imagined by Howard quickly becomes the reference point of the new urban planning in the industrialized countries and, at the same time, in its realizations it loses the trait of the city – that is, the original principles and characteristics from which its ideological strength derived – and becomes suburban. This is also the case in the United States, which incorporates Howard's ideas through the design of suburban construction, of suburban neighbourhoods surrounded by greenery and with a degree of autonomy that varies according the centre, revolutionizing the way of conceiving the city-countryside relationship. The English heritage of the Garden city has strongly characterized American urban planning starting from Stein and Wright's plan for Radburn of 1926 which is also affected by Olmsted's experience in defining the construction of Riverside in 1898 and which marks, with its double paths for pedestrians and motorists, the beginning of the automobile age (Talen, 2005). Already Olmsted had summarized in the Riverside plan the needs of single-family homes with those of community services, the presence of nature and urban living, creating what is considered the most successful American suburb.

The ideology behind the Garden city maintains its strength even when the principle of high density emerges in the twentieth century and Coral Gables, New Venice, San Jose Estate and Jacksonville in Florida are born, characterized by an explicit European influence that seeks its regional identity in the replacement of the cottage with the Spanish-American home. Subsequently Greenbelt was created in Maryland, known for its crescent

moon shape, planned under the New Deal program, which becomes the symbol of the ideology of decentralization.

After the Second World War the Americans began to pursue urban planning policies that were dramatically far from the standards of liveability and quality of life, abandoning the original model of the Garden city. The period from 1945 to 1955 can be considered the dark age in American urban history since it witnessed the demolition of entire urban areas and the elimination of the small town from the landscape (Hanlon *et al*., 2010). Areas that showed signs of decay, neighbourhoods still alive and full of character, historic buildings were swept away to be replaced by more modern buildings for technical and construction and design, highways, parking lots and lots that were then left empty. The resulting suburban sprawl although born as an alternative to urban life – now perceived as in irreversible decline – had quickly revealed itself "a landscape of scary place, the geography of nowhere, that has simply ceased to be a credible human habitat"(Kunstler,1994, p. 15).

American intellectuals have contributed to fuelling the anti-urban ideology also by openly declaring anti-urban sentiments and enhancing the contrast between city and countryside through a narrative that saw the moral values of the countryside and the danger and threat to civilization represented by the city (Tafuri, 1974). Artificial places so well described by Philip Dick in *Time out of Joint*, a novel set in a 1950s American suburb with its identical villas, middle class families, well-kept gardens, dual cars and television always on in the living room. It is the landscape of dreams, promises and aspirations of the Americans who have sought economic security and better living conditions and where the ideals of private property and freedom, as well as those of harmony and spirituality, have crystallized. A landscape that has become a distinctive feature of the suburb, rhetorically narrated by American cinema until the 1970s by the characters played by Doris Day, the typical suburban housewife that symbolized the white flight from the urban and industrial landscape that was eventually compromised. The power of the imaginary of the suburbs is well represented in *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* (Walters, 1960), in which Doris Day and David Niven leave their New York apartment to relocate in the suburbs. The notion is clearly manifested that New York is not a good place to live and raise one's children, showing one of the fundamental features of the suburban ideology of the contrast between the residential

suburbs female, the domestic realm in which women were raising children, and the city male, the city where the men continued to work (Robertson Wojcik, 2010). Commuting between the city and the suburbs is the price to pay to have a house with a garden and good schools. More recent films have also tried to narrate and represent the evolution of the neat and stereotypical society, always suspended between reality and fiction, as for example in *American Beauty*, in which Mendes represents the life of the middle-class American family that lives in quiet and unchangeable tree-lined suburbs, with the milk and newspapers delivered to the front door every morning. It is a film that denounces the failure of a society that is besieged by a deep sense of moral and spiritual confusion, and that launches a frontal attack on the celebration of the American lifestyle and of the "American beauty" that seems lost, but that is still shared heritage of the hopes and ideals of all Americans.

After all, referring to the suburbs of the post-2nd world war period, Mumford already argued that:

In the suburb one might live and die without marring the image of an innocent world, except when some shadow of evil fell over a column in the newspaper. Thus the suburb served as an asylum for the preservation of illusion. Here domesticity could prosper, oblivious of the pervasive regimentation beyond. This was not merely a child-centred environment; it was based on a childish view of the world, in which reality was sacrificed to the pleasure principle (1961,p. 464).

Kaplan offers a rich description of how the suburb responds to the American dream:

The dream of most Americans is an attractively packaged comfortable single-family home set off from its neighbours on a well-landscaped plot in an economically, socially, and racially homogeneous community of good schools and convenient shopping. It is a dream not of a challenging, involved life-style rich in excitement, of the possibility of fantasies like true, but rather of a leisurely life-style, of privacy, health, security, status, and few conflicts. [...] To the majority of Americans, it is suburbia that still offers the greatest hope of that dream(1976, pp. 1-2).

The awareness that suburbia was the antithesis of the community and that sprawl was not a place to live the relationships, vitality and experiences typical of urban life became increasingly present also among the residents themselves. This awareness inspired the New Urbanism

movement which, starting from the mid-80s, taking up Howard's ideas again, tried to define what American urbanism should have been, to understand the relationship between built-up environment and social life, but above all to enhance the symbolic component of distinctive architecture. Inevitably, the attention of New Urbanism focuses on the suburb, also because of its inhumanity and its pervasiveness in the American landscape. The basic idea is that the suburbs represent the ancient city and that as such it should be rethought and, above all, redesigned in such a way as to allow the re-creation of true communities. The architectural quality and the constant mention of the past in the forms of the buildings are the keys to this form of community revivalism. A classic example is certainly Celebration in Florida designed by a group of New York architects in a "fake antique" style. Founded in 1994 by Disney, it is the expression of a programmed access new urbanism. An exclusive community, therefore, which, at least on paper, is organized around a commercial core with shops, restaurants, offices and homes that try to recreate the quality of life of a small city where you can move on foot and where children can play on the street controlled by parents and by the community itself (Passell, 2013).

4. Analysing the dream

Is it therefore possible to narrate a city through its cultural values? Certainly, it is possible to reconstruct a continuity in the ideology that has shaped American cities since their foundation and which still remains today, albeit in a different way, one of the distinctive features of the culture and values that define the current American urban dimension. While the development of suburban sprawl is judged as the result of incompetent choices by planners and city politicians, who opposed the sense of community by fuelling isolation and alienation, Garden city suburbs, which had a refined and elegant shape and a distinctive design, have now become synonymous with livability and quality of life. In fact, suburbs such as Chesnut Hill in Philadelphia, Mariemont outside Cincinnati, Beverly Hills and Palos Verdes near Los Angeles or Forest Hills outside New York were built not only as real estate investments, but also to improve the quality of urban life of the residents. Seaside Village in

Connecticut, built in 1918, is now a community-oriented suburb that expresses a good level of quality of life. As well as Yorkship Village in New Jersey, now known as Fairview (Morris, 2005).

Despite the differences in terms of planning and design, both the garden city suburbs and the subsequent spread of the suburban sprawl are inspired, albeit with different methods and intensities, by Howard's idealism and narrate the evolution and mutation that occurred in the application of the original model. A component of this mutation is due to the need of local governments to build theoretical and practical bases to legitimize a strong intervention in the management of urban growth. In this sense, the Garden city offered an imagery that could be used to justify urban landscape policies and norms, and which recalled popular concepts that transferred interest and value. In particular, the reference to the Garden city responded to the promise of accessible living, efficient use of community resources and the presence of services and green spaces. It therefore seemed a perfect theory to respond to market needs and, at the same time, support growth in a manner consistent with the ideals of the American dream. The Garden city had a democratic charm and provided a perfect setting for the nuclear family and for the values and aspirations with which it was the bearer. The single-family suburban house thus becomes the symbol par excellence of a rich, optimistic and powerful nation (Rohe, Watson, 2007). Whether it was the independent Queens' cottage with its small garden and place for the car or the large and sumptuous home in Beverly Hills, the inspiring principle was the same, only the size and shape changed.

The suburbanization of the population was therefore a rapid transition that marked the American urban history of the second post-war period and transformed the United States into a suburban nation thanks also to the demand of the baby-boomers, but above all to a political will that flourished in the New Deal, strongly affirmed in the second post-war period and which has survived until today. Ownership of the house was facilitated by access to real estate mortgages with particular incentives for those who purchased in suburban areas. And thanks to the National Interstate Highways and Defense Act of 1956, the construction of thousands of kilometers of new highways was started which should have facilitated connections for a population increasingly eager to embrace an ideal life model and to access the American dream, homogeneous both

from a racial and social point of view. So two different ways of understanding urban planning which characterized different phases of American culture but which are united by an attempt to give an answer to the myth of the American dream representing, even in the 21st century, one of the main building blocks of the national identity, despite the uncertainty and fragmentation.

The evolution of the American suburb followed Tocqueville's intuitions in an almost prophetic way when, in the second volume of *Democracy in America*(1848), he spoke of "equality of conditions" referring in reality not so much to the ideal of egalitarian democracy that had inspired the Founding Fathers, but much, to use an expression of Adorno, to the massification of consumer taste. Equality in the sense that Tocqueville attributes to it, is equality of desires, aspirations, consumption – well expressed, for example, by the Hippodamian-inspired grid plan of New York – and certainly not the idea, which is otherwise illusory, "that income would become more equal in the American future, or that democracy would level power politics"(Sennett, 2018, p. 146). In this sense, the numerous criticisms of the single-nuclear-family house must be considered, many of which are severe, especially with regard to the most mass-produced and repetitive achievements. It is precisely this transition from an uncritical adherence to the America dream supported by the imperfect application of Howard's anti-urban ideology, to the denunciation of a standardized model that highlights the main features of the evolution of the suburb from the second post-war period to the present day and which recalls Tocqueville's vision.

The very evolution of the suburbs seems to be a perfect metaphor of American culture and of its weaknesses. From a symbol of the American dream in which the aspirations to and promises of a better life and the plans of antiurban utopias are settled, and in particular of the Garden city, which aspired to cure the evils of the city, the suburb has been progressively transformed into a massified and repetitive place that does not allow for distinction, the affirmation of identity, the valorization of diversity and of different lifestyles.

In fact, in the second half of the twentieth century the suburb, that is to say the characteristic form of housing in American metropolises, was transformed into suburbia, i.e. an ordinary, homologated and familiar extension of housing that does not have elements of distinction and can no

longer be approached to the utopia which in some way constituted its conceptual basis at the origin (Duany *et al.*, 2001). In this regard, Yi-Fu Tuan states that "Suburb is an ideal [...] on the other hand suburbia, a word of much more recent coinage, appears to mock this ideal" (1974, p. 225). And yet Kunstler with greater controversy denounces that

this nation's suburban build out was an orgy of misspent energy and material resources that squandered our national wealth [and let to] cultural destruction [...] especially the loss of knowledge, tradition, skill, custom, and vernacular wisdom in the art of city-making that was thrown into the dumpster of history(2001, p. 11).

Part of this process was deliberate and guided by projects of planned urban expansion, while a large part was spontaneous and market-driven, pushing millions of people to move from the city to the suburbs that seemed the perfect answer to the ambitions and aspirations of the American dream (Monkkonen, 1990). After two centuries now of experience with the suburbs and their ways of growing, today the Americans face the consequences, in terms of space homologation and negation of the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1970), of the biggest ever investment in private housing that the world has ever seen.

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