

Michael Breheny

*Centrists, Decentrists and Compromisers: Views on the
Future of Urban Form*

Introduction

The sustainable development imperative has revived a forgotten, or discredited, idea: that planning ought to be done, or can be done, on a big scale. Up to the 1960s planning had a long, and reasonably creditable, history of visionary ideas. After that date, the public lost confidence in planners, and planners lost confidence in themselves. Subsequently, pragmatism has ruled. However, there is now a fascinating debate underway about the role of planning in promoting sustainable development, and—here we have the big idea—about which urban forms will most effectively deliver greater environmental protection. Viewed as a narrow environmental debate, the issue is profoundly important. But when the broader economic, social and cultural repercussions are taken into account, it soon becomes apparent that nothing less than the future of western lifestyles is at stake.

This debate is not the preserve of unworldly academics. It is taking place at inter-governmental, governmental, and local government levels across the world. Following the Brundtland Commission report of 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), the notion that the natural environment should become a political priority—under the ‘sustainable development’ banner—has taken hold to a remarkable degree. In many countries there have been profound changes in policies and in political and popular attitudes, as commitment to the sustainable development idea has increased. The fundamental question in all places, however, has been how to deliver major environmental improvements. One common answer seems to be to use planning systems to achieve these gains; and, in turn, to use those planning systems to achieve greater urban compaction. Thus, a legitimate, indeed profound, research question is whether such compaction—‘the compact city’—will deliver the gains demanded by the politicians.

The political urgency of this debate is demonstrated by the fact that we have a rare case of politicians racing ahead of academics, pressing for specific policies before the research community is able to say with any confidence which policies will have what effects. Perhaps this arises because national governments are keen to meet—and be seen to meet—international environmental obligations.

Although, as we will see, the debate is tending to favour heavily one solution, the scope of the debate can be usefully summarised by classifying stances initially into two groups: ‘decentrists’, who favour urban decentralisation, largely as a reaction to the problems of the industrial cities; and ‘centrists’, who believe in the virtues of high density cities and decry urban sprawl.

The decentrist and centrist views of urban form have long histories, albeit that the motives for their promotion in the past have been somewhat different from those driving the current debate. These histories are important, however, because although they do not cast much direct light on the sustainability question, they do put that question into a wider context. They also act as a reminder that decisions made on

environmental grounds will have broader—economic, social, and cultural—repercussions that must not be ignored. There is a danger at present that the sheer weight of the environmental argument will swamp all other considerations. Indeed, for some this is the hope.

Thus, the review presented here will (a) reflect briefly and selectively on the histories of the decentrist and centrist arguments, and (b) outline the contemporary debate, focusing as it does on the environmental issues. In the historical review the decentrist and centrist approaches will be considered in turn. In the contemporary review, the two will be considered together. This is because the current promotion of one or the other consists largely in criticism of the opposite position, to a much greater degree than in the past. This makes for a slightly messy presentation, but does allow the richness of the interplay of ideas between the two stances to emerge. When the decentrist and centrist positions have been reviewed, it will be argued in conclusion that the existence of a third stance ought to be recognised: a conscious middle line in this debate—the ‘compromise’ view.

The weight attached in this review to various positions reflects the material readily available to the author. Thus, it has a strong Anglo-American flavour, with a bias in favour of the British material. In turn, within the British literature there is an inevitable focus on projects with which the author is particularly familiar or has been involved. Thus, the perspective is partial, perhaps even narrow. However, it is hoped that the coverage is sufficient to map the boundaries of the debate.

*Historical advocacy of centrism and decentrism: radiant city, garden city or
Broadacres?*

Different protagonists in the centrist versus decentrist debate over the years have had different motives. The mainstream concern has been with the quality of urban and rural life and, to a lesser extent, the aesthetics of urbanity. As Hall (1988) says, the history of 20th century planning ‘represents a reaction to the evils of the nineteenth-century city’ (p. 7). From Howard, Geddes, Wright, and Le Corbusier, through to Mumford and Osborn and many followers, this was the motive. In the post-1945 period, with the cities appearing to be rather less evil and the problems being increasingly of 20th century origin, planning motives became more diverse, more specific and less visionary. Nevertheless, centrist and decentrist camps remained clear, and, as we will see, the occasional big idea did emerge, through to the early 1970s.

Many wonderful histories of planning have been written. The ideas and practices explained below have all been covered thoroughly and expertly elsewhere (for example, Hall, 1988; Fishman, 1977). Indeed, this review relies heavily on these sources. What is different here, however, is the attempt to see elements of this planning history directly in terms of the decentrist versus centrist debate.

It is difficult to know where to start in reviewing the history of discussions about appropriate urban forms. It is probably fair to say that the decentrist view has the longer pedigree. Conscious practical town planning developed in Europe and North America in reaction to the squalor of the towns and cities thrown up by the Industrial Revolution. Although this reaction included initiatives within those towns and cities, it also spawned decentralised solutions. In the UK these took the form of private, philanthropic ventures from the early 19th century onwards, most obviously at New Lanark, Saltaire, Port Sunlight, Bournville, and New Earswick. The common denominator of all of these initiatives was a desire to plan for communities in healthy and efficient surroundings, away from the disease and congestion of the industrial towns. These planned communities made only a minor dent in the dominant process of urban centralisation, which continued in Europe until the immediate post-1945 period. Nevertheless, they are important in this history because they established, for the first time, the idea that there might be a conscious alternative to centripetal urbanisation.

The most important period in the history of the debate about urban form was from 1898 through to 1935. During this period the boundaries of the debate were mapped out. The extreme cases were both proposed in full in 1935; by Le Corbusier the arch-centrist, and Frank Lloyd Wright the champion decentrist. Both had the benefit of being able to reflect on the work of Ebenezer Howard, in terms of his ideas and their practical application at Letchworth, Welwyn Garden City and Hampstead Garden Suburb. In fact, both felt the need to propose antidotes to Howard's influential views. The following brief historical review will be built around these three contributions; because they all proposed big, total solutions to the urban problem, and also because they represent the extreme position. Other contributions to the debate can be built fruitfully around the three defining views of planning history's most important 'seers' (Hall, 1992).

Placed alongside the extremes of La Ville Radieuse and Broadacres City, Howard's Garden City proposal seems to hold the middle ground. Indeed, later it will be suggested that Howard ought to be regarded not as a centrist or decentrist, but as a representative of a compromise position. However, others, and most obviously Jane Jacobs, have cast him firmly as a villainous decentrist; indeed, as *the* villain.

The order in which these three sets of solutions should be reviewed is not obvious. The extremes of Le Corbusier and Wright might be presented first, in order to demonstrate that Howard is best cast in the middle ground rather than as the decentrist villain portrayed by some commentators. The alternative is a more obvious chronological coverage, because this both reflects the sequence of ideas and allows the work of Le Corbusier and Wright to be seen, in part, as a reaction to Howard. The latter approach is adopted, with Howard and Wright, considered as decentrists, followed by Le Corbusier as the classic centrist.

Decentrists in planning history

As we will see later, both Wright and Le Corbusier were presenting antidotes to the profoundly influential ideas of Ebenezer Howard: 'the most important single character in this entire tale' (Hall, 1988, p. 87). Howard, a stenographer by trade, became an amateur social reformer, pondering the large social and economic issues of the 1880s and 1890s, but with a particular concern with the urban squalor created by rapid industrialisation. To him the cities were 'ulcers on the very face of our beautiful island' (Fishman, 1977, p. 38).

Howard concluded that 'Radical hopes for a cooperative civilization could be fulfilled only in small communities embedded in a decentralized society' (Fishman, 1977, p. 37). He acknowledged that the cities did have some attractive characteristics. Hence, Howard was looking for a marriage of the best of town and country. The famous three magnet diagram asked the question: 'the people: where will they go?'. The answer was to 'town-country', or the 'garden city'. Howard's garden cities would accommodate 32,000 people, at a density of approximately 25–30 people per acre; a density level that Fishman (1977, p. 42) suggests might have been borrowed from Dr Richardson's 1876 plan for *Hygeia: A City of Health*, and Hall (1988, p. 93) says was higher than that in the historical city of London. The 1898 version of Howard's book showed groups of garden cities, linked by railways, all forming a polycentric Social City (Hall, 1988, p. 92). Residential areas, each built around a school, would be separated from industrial areas. The central area would have civic buildings, a park and an arcade or 'crystal palace' containing shops. The town would occupy 1,000 acres, surrounded by a 5,000 acre belt of agricultural land. This belt would provide the town with produce, but would also act as a green belt, preventing the town from spilling into adjacent countryside. Thus, despite Howard's view that 'every man, every woman, every child should have ample space in which to live, to move, and to develop' (Fishman, 1977, p. 45), the solution is one of contained decentralisation. This point is important for present purposes. It places Howard at some considerable distance from the arch-decentrists.

Howard's legacy is well known. Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City became direct, practical, and ultimately very successful, applications of his ideas. Howard's Garden City Association established a forum