

# **An Idea for Delivering Affordable Housing**

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## **Introduction**

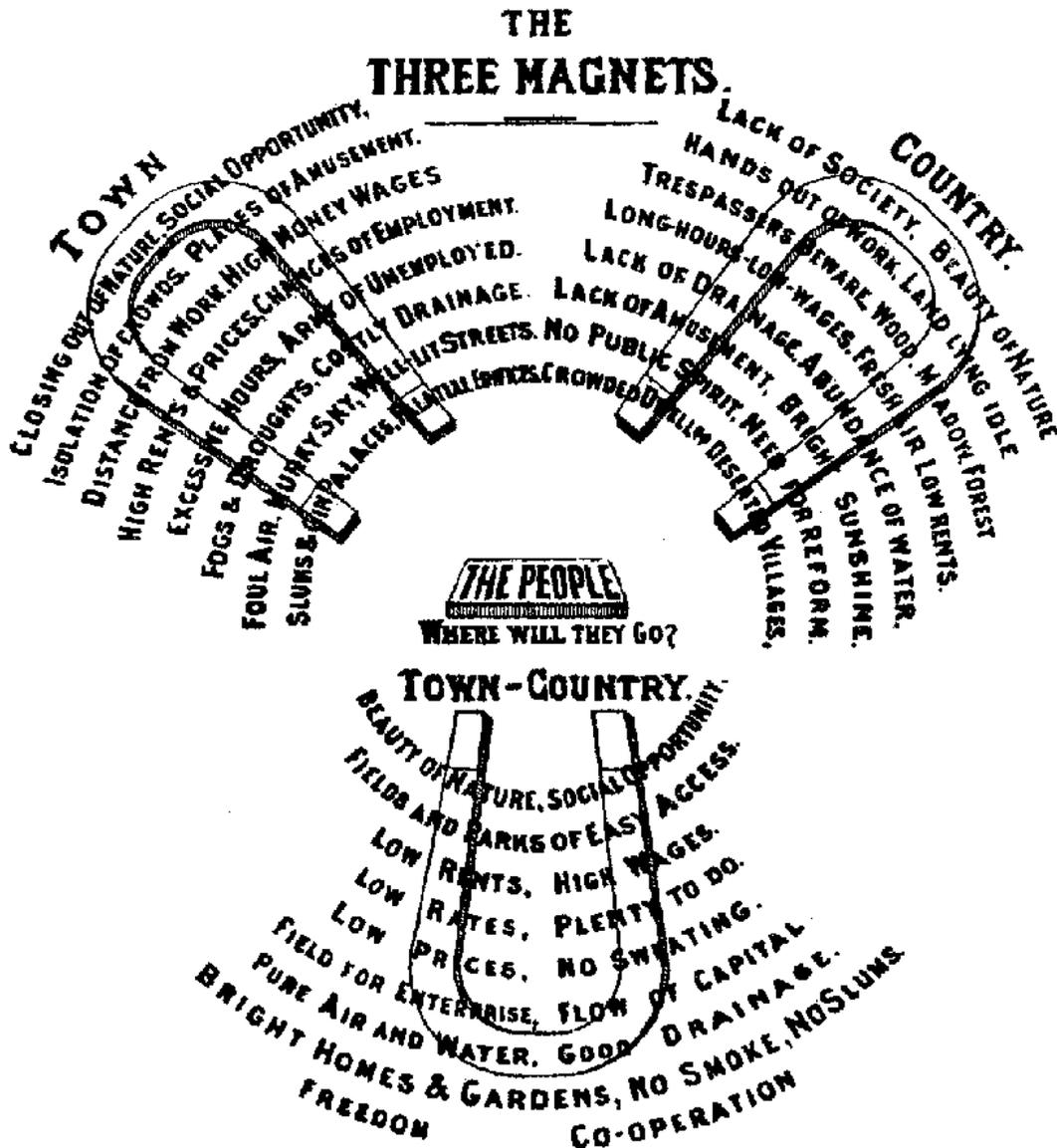
The best way to solve the current crisis may be to apply classical interpretations from relevant but different times and places. Affordable housing provision in South East Queensland demands attention. I explore a solution that combines some initial government intervention to secure affordable land shielded from the inflation created by land speculators but is balanced by private ownership of the end, affordable housing product.

I have reviewed three books as they relate to this crucial Community Planning topic. The first book is the third edition of Peter Hall's 'Cities of Tomorrow' from which I have extracted the main issues and history relating to my topic. I then consulted John Rawl's 'A Theory of Justice' in order to examine the justice or injustice of our current housing situation. I subsequently investigated ways in which Community Planning might resolve the problem within Patsy Healey's text of 'Urban Complexity and Spatial Strategies (2007)'. I have related my conclusions back to Hall's account of Ebenezer Howard's 'Garden Cities of Tomorrow' in his own 'Cities of Tomorrow' to outline my proposed solution. This solution involves the creation of new community run settlements in the form of new Community or 'Communitarian' Housing Clusters to provide an additional land and housing supply to assist in relieving the affordability problem affecting this, and many other regions.

## **Cities of Tomorrow**

From this book I have sought to extract some insight into the history, source and possible partial cure for the housing affordability crisis that currently affects our region. The book has given me some comfort by the way in which it covers the history of planning in which this problem emerges and then disappears within the market cycles time and time again. These cycles have recently played out in parts of the USA and Britain.

The section on Ebenezer Howard 'In the City of the Garden' shows the classic magnet diagram. One of the key items marked on the 'Town' list is 'High Rents and Prices'. Much of his concern seems to have been related to improving housing affordability and living conditions. He dreamed of a local community without central government taxation and controls to achieve this aim.



Perhaps what we need is a resurgence of these ideas to assist in solving the housing affordability crisis. Urban consolidation seems to have failed to produce affordable housing on mass. Entities like the Brisbane Housing Company are having important successes, but the tide of rising prices and rents seems to be outweighing these efforts. The apartment blocks, or 'machines for living' as Le Corbusier put it, have generally not proved to be highly affordable. The price of land in the centres where they are permitted has increased significantly due to rampant land speculation activities magnified by low land taxes and low interest rates. The costs of building also have increased. The average construction cost, per metre, is almost double for high rise than that of a house. The cost of rates, Body Corporate management, lift operation and other maintenance costs have increased to over \$100 a week within some new apartment blocks. We also see continued community objection to this form of development, and generally not community support, particularly when marked as an affordable housing project.

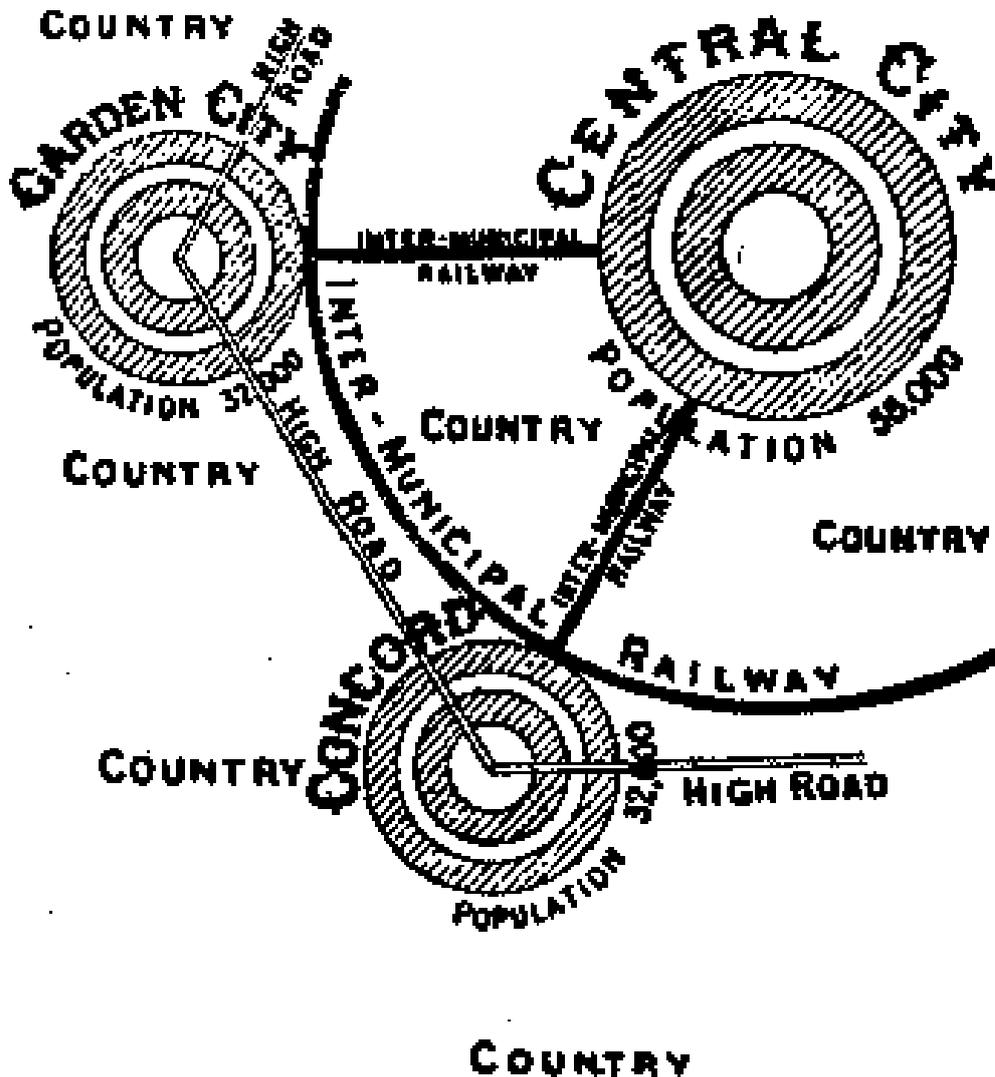
We now find ourselves in the situation of a city constrained horizontally by the urban footprint and constrained vertically by costs and difficulties associated with gaining approvals for high rise development.

The answer could lie in the planning of new community clusters in the Ebenezer Howard vision. Up until now that has often meant the corrupted interpretations of the Garden City concept that resulted in massive continuous suburban sprawl or even rural residential development on the fringes. An example of this would be the North Lakes development at Mango Hill which supposedly used Garden City concepts. Ebenezer Howard was actually encouraging more compact community run clusters. They were limited in size and contained a green buffer boundary. In this region perhaps these communities could be located in areas where the environment is already disturbed with little additional impact (e.g. former pine forest or cane farm land). The important question of their location seems to be access to appropriate public transport and / or co-location of services and employment within these communities.

**N<sup>o</sup> 5.**

**DIAGRAM**

**ILLUSTRATING CORRECT PRINCIPLE**  
**OF A CITY'S GROWTH - OPEN COUNTRY**  
**EVER NEAR AT HAND, AND RAPID**  
**COMMUNICATION BETWEEN OFF-SHOOTS.**



The urban footprint, as it now stands, in South East Queensland would seem to restrict this form of development envisaged by Howard. However there could still be a number of sites available within the Ipswich Corridor. Restricting land supply and Durban consolidation seems to serve the ends of a centralised authoritarian government seeking to control the population in the high rise 'machines

for living'. Community planning and community governance perhaps is the answer to counter this and to resolve many of our urban problems, including housing affordability. These 'Garden City' settlements could provide a significant additional housing supply. They could be built with little impact on the environment and function efficiently if appropriately located, serviced and administered by the community itself. The challenge is to first find locations for these settlements within the urban footprint. If this could not be done on a sufficient scale then other sites should be investigated outside the urban footprint.

## **A Theory of Justice**

I have chosen to consult this book in order to gain some perspective on the concept of justice as it relates to the housing affordability issue. I have seen the problem as a source of injustice for those under housing stress. The increasing price of property and housing has been extremely profitable for developers and investors whilst others have suffered.

The book speaks of the social contract and...

*'...certain rules of conduct as binding and who for the most part act in accordance with them' (Page 4).*

If we are to allow injustice to fester the respect for this 'contract' will deteriorate as individuals or groups seek to correct the situation by whatever means are available to them.

*'Distrust and resentment corrode the ties of civility, and suspicion and hostility tempt men to act in ways they would otherwise avoid' (page 6)*

Comments are made about what is just and unjust may be in dispute. This is certainly the case with the housing affordability issue. Many see the provision of affordable housing as an injustice if they themselves did not receive this form of assistance. An 'affordable house' may be built to a standard superior to existing housing sparking jealousy. Younger generations may ask why they have to pay infrastructure charges when their parents did not. Young families may feel trapped into paying a housing investor a large portion of their wages with no chance of saving to buy their own home. All of these questions need to be balanced within community planning.

I believe this book suggests that if social issues like housing affordability worsen then people will commence action that could disturb the civil order. History has shown this to be the case. Methods such as rent payment strikes, resentment of the 'slum lords', property crime, and squatting are examples of some of the social consequences of this form of injustice. Other related outcomes of housing problems can include poor family cohesion, higher chances of exposure to abusive situations, and class division. The high quality of life in this country is critically linked to the 'Australian dream' and the institution of home ownership. Housing inaffordability threatens this core of our society.

## Urban Complexity and Spatial Strategies

This book discusses a disconnect between the urban area and the lack of Government entities and policy to cover the urban region. Often these urban areas contain a number of different government entities. For this reason it may well be a more effective solution to have some responsibilities such as delivery of affordable housing based at the community level or resolved within a community context.

It speaks of the routines and practices that are often difficult to change. New ideas often create tension as they can upset existing alliances and understandings. No doubt any new entity created would be seen as a competitor to existing government operations.

The interesting point is made that highly regulated planning models do claim to be more efficient at providing sites and infrastructure and

*"...organising urban development to provide low-cost housing and welfare support for workers."*  
Page 25.

I believe that this statement acknowledges the role of authoritarian style (Ordered) planning in certain circumstances. Probably this is best justified where a social goal is the object (eg. Producing affordable housing). Where competition based planning strategies have failed, and the wanted outcomes are so known that further community consultation is merely tokenism, this may be justified. However it appears that, to date, centralised attempts to solve the housing affordability issue such as rent subsidies and housing grants have merely served to further inflate the housing market. In addition to this State housing departments have failed to supply sufficient public housing as an easy fix to quickly and significantly lessen the affordability crisis.

The author speaks of the inspiration Planners can take from utopian societies such as those of Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities of Tomorrow. However, as mentioned, care must be taken when putting these early theories into practice. The housing clusters of 'Garden Cities' have often been misinterpreted into the suburban sprawl we see today. Ebenezer Howard was reacting to the excesses of industrial Britain which became the 'world's workshop'. The level of industrial activity is perhaps comparable to that of China today but within a country many times smaller. Obviously living conditions in some areas were extremely poor. Maybe there was an overreaction to density. It is perhaps only now that we are rediscovering the benefits of higher density living, if well designed. But can it deliver affordability? Continental European cities never seemed to be as strongly influenced by these ideas and seemed to maintain their compactness, but they have never been held up as examples of greatly affordable cities. The, almost sudden, pursuit of urban consolidation in most western cities, combined with artificial restrictions on land supply have certainly been a contributing factor to the current affordability crisis.

Within just a few years in South East Queensland we have seen the removal of family subdivision and most rural residential subdivision provisions. I am not suggesting that this form of development is ideal but the impact of removing it as a land supply option should be considered in the way it contributes to the affordable housing stock.

At the very same time there has been a major switch to the application of the 'user pays' philosophy that has seen massive increases in development fees and infrastructure charges (Brisbane City

Council Fees and Charges, 2009). These charges were justified as charges on developers who immediately passed them onto the home buyer. Once accepted they inflated many times over within just a few years. In the meantime those already with property, which had been subsidised from the rate and other tax bases, enjoyed the gains as the price of supplying new housing inflated along with the price of existing stock. This is a matter of injustice between the generations and for those who did not, or could not, buy in the past. It is these injustices that can cause unrest in a society. If we have identified such an injustice we should take steps to correct or compensate for it.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion reached is that housing affordability is a recurring problem. Higher densities may not deliver sufficiently affordable housing options as hoped. Restrictions on the horizontal expansion of the city need to be offset by other land supply options. The affordability crisis creates forms of injustice that if not checked can lead to social disruption. This could outweigh the other planning goals we are pursuing under urban consolidation and other related policies. Community Planning presents one possible aspect of the solution. If individuals can work together to create new Garden City settlements the problem could be overcome in two ways. The first is that affordable housing can be appropriately incorporated into the settlements in a design process that involves the community itself at the outset. Secondly, these new settlements, if appropriately located on affordable land already in public ownership (such as a school site closed due to demographic change, or decommissioned defence land), could partially relieve the developable land shortage issue.

Planners can act as guides to these new communities in the design process to ensure appropriate development is encouraged.

The community based answer to the affordable housing issue may not lie entirely in higher density development. In fact, communities have generally rallied to oppose these schemes. I would argue we need to investigate the continued responsible supply of new affordable land for community clusters as part of the solution. This may be state or private land providing that it is affordable when purchased. The necessary rezoning and approvals could be obtained in collaboration with local planning authorities after the purchase to ensure the land value does not increase prior to securing it as a result of speculation.

There is no doubt that the housing affordability issue can be resolved if there is the will to do it. This material shows just one workable option. The combination of ideas related to development of the city, government policy and social justice can produce a solution which tackles urban problems and produces successful communities.