

Re-Imagining the Garden City
DESIGN REPORT



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GARDENIA

The inspiration behind this new place is a connection with nature and Letchworth's founding vision of a city of gardens.

The city is growing and the development is imagined as a branch, reaching into the countryside.

Like sap is the lifeblood of a branch, flowing back and forth, Gardenia's branch is filled with people moving along it - going to work, going home, going to school, to the shops but ultimately engaging as a community; a living, vibrant, green movement spine.

And sprouting off of this stem are the 'leaves' – quieter clusters of homes around garden spaces.

Clusters are what Gardenia is all about; small communities of homes arranged around green spaces, not roads.

As the concept of the Garden City approaches 120 years old, and hundreds of thousands of new homes are required across the country to address housing shortages, Ebenezer Howard's notion of a place which blends the best of the town and the country is more relevant than ever today. 'Gardenia' is in keeping with the Garden City tradition offering a bold, original and modern 21st Century model that is nature-inspired, semi-autonomous and community-centric.

THE SITE – DEVELOPING A STRATEGY

The site is a beautiful rural location to the north of the city. In developing our ideas for it we have considered the following principles:

- **A place of places** – we want the whole development to have a strong sense of place, a common distinctivity, but within it for there to be lots of smaller places, each with their own character.
- **Maximise its biodiversity** – as largely open, arable land there is great opportunity to introduce habitat and make it a hugely net-positive development
- **Well connected** – to outside the site but with lots of internal linkages too, comprised of busier public areas and quieter semi private areas
- **Walkable** – the layout should make walking and cycling easier and more appealing than getting into the car
- **Visionary but practical** – the design should be exciting and convention-challenging yet still appeal to the expectations of everyday buyers

KEY IDEAS / CONCEPTS FOR THE RE-IMAGINATION OF THE GARDEN CITY

1. GREENWAY RE-ALIGNMENT AND THE LINEAR GARDEN

One of our first decisions was to divert the existing greenway through the heart of the site. This would create a new people and wildlife friendly route that would connect the entire development together. Placing it down the central spine of the site means that every home would be just a short walk from the greenway. As well as being a practical movement spine, it was conceived as a linear garden, or a series of interconnecting gardens - a beautiful resource for residents and visitors alike.

Channelling everyone to use this one route would mean that it is well used. This is important for three reasons:

- I. Being busier makes it safer, so more people are likely to want to spend time in it
- II. Having one principal public open space puts quality over quantity. It means that it will be better used, better maintained, better managed
- III. With everyone using the same route it encourages a sense of community. People are more likely to see someone they know, or meet new people

2. COMMUNITY HUB AT THE HEART OF THE DEVELOPMENT

We have clustered all the non-residential uses (and some residential uses) at the centre of the development, at the arrival main point from the north. Keeping them all in one place creates a natural focus, a place for people to head for, a meeting point and it encourages the long-term sustainability of these facilities. Ultimately, it encourages inter-generation contact, crucial in building resilient communities. Placing them at the entrance also reduces any potential delivery or visitor traffic to residential areas.

In this location we are proposing:

- A Primary School, positioned to be next to the playing pitches
- A Community and Business Hub, offering flexible work / event / café & retail space, a crèche, storage facilities, click & collect, community fridge, health centre and visitor accommodation
- A City Farm, where principles of urban agriculture can be demonstrated. An attached kitchen will sell produce
- A Nursery and Garden Centre, appropriately for Gardenia
- A Retirement Village, providing convenient access to all the amenities for residents and the enjoyment of being able to watch life come and go
- A Sustainable Transport Interchange and Energy Centre

3. A GARDEN AT THE HEART OF A DEVELOPMENT OF GARDENS

By coincidence, the main axis of the original Letchworth Garden City Masterplan cuts through the centre of the site. Late 20th Century development to the north of the city has ignored this strong geometry however there is now an opportunity to reconnect with Richard Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin's original visionary design. To mark the axis, a tall vertical garden is proposed – a green heart at the heart of the new development. Not only will it this structure be visible from the town but it will offer views back down the city's axis.

4. SEMI-AUTONOMOUS LEAF CLUSTERS

Although there will be homes along the linear garden parkland, the majority of homes will be clustered around small shared gardens – the 'leaves'. We imagined Gardenia as Letchworth's garden quarter, where the development is defined by these spaces - each one

with their own slightly different quality. This idea is about departing from the conventional notion of development being along roads or streets, which are not conducive to community, and a large green space being provided somewhere else, that 'belongs' to no-one. Instead, we are proposing development in community-centric clusters around smaller green spaces, which feel more 'owned' and loved by the residents which surround them. While still being grid-connected, each cluster will harvest food, energy and water. Giving communities more awareness and control over their resources will foster a greater awareness and sensitivity about their own environmental footprint. Smaller clusters will have individual greenhouses within the garden; larger clusters will have a larger shared greenhouse. All clusters will have communal tanks in the gardens with visible gauges. Energy used and energy generated will also be displayed communally.

5. SHARE-STATIONS

At the entrance to each of the courtyard clusters, we have proposed 'share-stations'. These are points at which communal resources are pooled. We imagine each cluster having an electric car-club vehicle, whose energy is topped up via a PV parking canopy; e-bike, a communal recycling and compost point; a store of gardening tools; a mini-library where people can share books they have finished with; a space for surplus garden produce.

6. URBANIFICATION v RURALIFICATION

Development becomes more concentrated as one gets closer to the main community hub, to reduce the need for car journeys. The outer edges of the development become more rural in character as they merge into the countryside.

7. INTER-GENERATIONAL LIVING AND GARDEN ROOM (TO GROW)

A retirement village is proposed adjacent to the primary school within the community hub, promoting opportunities for interaction between both the two. Garden rooms are also proposed as a base-build feature. These provide flexible opportunities for homes to grow according to need – perhaps providing independent living for elderly relatives or for grown-up children saving up for a place of their own.

8. THE SEMI-DETACHED RE-INVENTED

Semi-detached homes are an extremely common feature in Garden Cities and post war development. We are proposing that many of Gardenia's semis are not the conventional two identical houses mirrored but two different houses joined. This will create greater architectural variety and more interesting roof profiles and massing.

9. URBAN FARM-HOUSES AND INTEGRATED SUNSPACES

As Garden Cities are the bridge between city & country, sunspaces or conservatories are the bridge between house and garden. Not only do they connect residents with the outdoors but these bright spaces are excellent for health and wellbeing, and if designed correctly can enhance the homes thermally. Like greenhouses, they are also ideal environments for food growing. We envisage homes being like mini farms – producing and harvesting food.

10. HABITAT HOUSES

We are proposing that some of the houses become wildlife-positive homes: entire walls shingled in bird boxes or bat boxes. Some also with green roofs. They are homes for wildlife as well as people – just as much landscape as house. They will showcase a new kind of bio-architecture that reminds Gardenians they are not the only residents of this development.

HOW HAS OUR SCHEME CHANGED SINCE THE STAGE 1 SUBMISSION?

We have undertaken a number of improvements to the design following stage 1 feedback from the competition organisers, the site visit in March and natural refinement of the scheme. Reflecting on the panel comments we recognise that panellists are concerned to be true to the Letchworth design character and tradition. We believe that this is a tradition of being bold, original and also modern - a forward-looking tradition and ironically a tension at the heart of the town's identity. When developing our design we were led by these principles and as a result sought to respect the modernist tradition which led to this original garden suburb. This is a principle which clearly inspired Le Corbusier amongst others, although this specific reference had not been our intention.

The main stage 2 changes are:

- a. **Raised gardens above parking** – although we have successfully delivered this design idea on other schemes we note the judging panel's concerns about viability and after further consideration we feel there is a better solution that is less likely to reinforce car use and ownership. The shared gardens in these clusters now have a strip of hard surface down one side that is punctuated by vehicle-friendly planted inserts which do not dilute the impression that this is still part of the garden. This means that the limited number of homes on this side of this strip can park down the side of their house, with cars obscured by timber screens. Cars for visitors and the homes on the other side of the garden are located in a hard standing area at the end of the space – secure and visually unobtrusive. This solution is highly practical and deliverable yet the tiny number of vehicle movements and 'greened' character of the road will maintain the sense of this cluster of homes being around a beautiful garden space.
- b. **Softer geometry** – in the previous submission we had not accounted for a substantial section of green buffer between these clusters and the existing homes to the east, which was noted following the site visit. To preserve this green area these clusters push out into the linear garden, happily resulting in a softer, more site-responsive geometry
- c. **The linear garden** – we have reconsidered the character of this green spine. Inspired by the tree-lined avenue in North Common we have moved one line of trees from the boulevard to the other side of the linear park. This makes the *whole park* the boulevard, rather than just the road. This produces a more legible diagram with roads downplayed. We have also removed some apartment buildings from this space, to reinforce the clarity and public quality of this as a completely green space. Instead, some of the homes that border the park are now apartment buildings – the ideal location for residents that do not have a garden of their own; the linear park becomes their garden.
- d. **The areas either side of the sports pitches** – these have become more organic and have been broken down in scale to fit better with the local urban grain. We have maintained the pedestrian links from the sports pitches and on the eastern side maintained an area of existing planting. These clusters are still imagined as places for those who want to look onto a garden but don't necessarily want a garden of their own. Each home will have a deck jutting into a wild, biodiversity-rich, managed landscape.
- e. **The three outer corners of the site** – these have developed a slightly different character, adding to the mix of places in the site. Still conceived as leaf clusters, they have now been developed as smaller, more intimate spaces, with only a few homes around each one. Being smaller has allowed us to propose these as completely car-free

spaces, with parking in small groupings at the entrance to these spaces. The scale and nature of these clusters make them ideal for possible self-build.

- f. **Stronger connection to the greenway** – we have altered the linear garden to connect much more strongly with the eastern and western ends of the greenway. The existing Pedestrian link to Western Way has also been incorporated.
- g. **Linkages across the linear garden** – there are now implied connections between clusters either side of the linear garden. This helps forge communities together and make the whole masterplan more connected and accessible.
- h. **Car-free community hub** – we have removed vehicle access to the central area making it a completely pedestrian and cycle friendly space. Buildings can be serviced from the routes which loop around the central hub now, which is also where the parking is located. This means that the central garden space and piazza will be safe, un-polluted and much more amenable to events like markets, performances, outdoor film screenings.

THE POTENTIAL FOR COMMUNITY SUPPORT

We are confident that our proposals would have broad local appeal.

- The new amenities we have proposed in our community hub
- Greenway routes largely preserved, new walking and cycling friendly linear garden
- Playing pitches preserved and new skatepark
- Green buffers between new and existing homes retained
- Proposed houses at 90 degrees to existing homes – reduced overlooking
- Hedges preserved and new wildlife habitat proposed
- Soft edge to countryside
- Inspiring and varied new homes proposed, including integrated affordable homes, good proportion of apartments, opportunities for self-build and custom-build
- Community–focussed design

COMMERCIAL ATTRACTIVENESS AND DELIVERABILITY

work with some of the UK's leading housebuilders so commerciality has been in the background of all our design decisions.

The design offers a wide range of appealing housetype opportunities within the different character areas. The cellular structure of the layout is highly compatible for a phased development and for areas of self and custom build. The clustering of the community hub will offer the best opportunities for its long term sustainability.

The green and blue infrastructure is founded on the existing capital and systems in place - mature trees and hedgerows, site topography and drainage swales which all form the framework for a sensitive water management system that is supportive of biodiversity and interweaved throughout the community spaces, enhancing amenity.

ACCOMMODATION SCHEDULE

Houses 579
Apartments 304
Retirement apartments 90

TOTAL = 973 homes

SUMMARY

Our masterplan is a bold, nature-inspired, semi-autonomous and community-centric re-imagining of the 21st Century Garden City.

Although the principles are adaptable to other locations, the design is also highly site-responsive and we would hope that it will be well-supported by the local community.

The layout is practical and viable – the cluster arrangement highly suited to phased delivery.

With its vibrant community hub, beautiful linear park and leafy garden clusters, Gardenia will be a highly desirable place; and an appropriately inspiring homage to Ebenezer Howard, Richard Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin's original vision.