

# The Tragedy of the Town Planning Profession

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Town planning is dead! Long live the transpolitical.

## 1. Overture

The town planning profession has been in crisis perennially. This crisis is driven by various factors dating back to the very origins of the profession. The journey the profession has travelled and the hostile environment that the profession operates in has influenced significantly the crisis. Among other professionals in the built environment, town planning struggles to establish identity and value of its own. Its fundamental role has been declining and facing extinction as society moves from the political to the transpolitical.

In this discussion paper, I explore the tragedy that town planning is facing as a profession. I chart through the challenging history that gave birth to town planning, the interventions that town planning has made to the ever-evolving society. I also explain how town planning professionals themselves inadvertently contribute to the demise of their profession at the detriment of cities. By engaging this debate, I seek to stimulate discussion on the future of the town planning profession and possibilities of saving the profession towards better cities.

## 2. Back to the Origins

Town planning profession is well known to have originated in the Garden City idea of Ebenezer Howard. This was a non-Marxist social utopian approach to reforming cities peacefully towards better quality of life. The garden city idea was a unique combination of proposals from earlier utopian socialist thinkers.<sup>1</sup> For Howard to come up with the Garden City idea, the *laissez-faire* as a system of organising society during the industrial revolution had proven catastrophic for cities. Unregulated private enterprise failed to provide for social investment and services critical to sustaining cities. Cities were affected by problems of diseases and ill health as buildings took place without effective control on standards. The lack of regulation led to poorly built houses, poor drainage, and unsanitary conditions that eventually led to cholera outbreaks and respiratory diseases caused by industrial pollution.

The network of garden cities that Howard proposed as a solution to the social ills of industrial cities was of decentralised network containing 30 000 people and surrounding a larger central city of 58 000. The garden cities

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<sup>1</sup> See Howard, 1898, p. 102.

were to be slum-free, pollution free with good quality housing and green spaces that separate the individual Garden Cities. Key to the Garden Cities idea was also the communal ownership of land to hedge against private land speculation.

As noble as the Garden City idea was as an alternative to the *laissez-faire* system that caused problems, town planning as a social reform movement remained a voluntary practice. Several measures were taken to address the problems of industrial cities including building control, zoning regulations under public health legislation.

In the British context, which influenced town planning globally, the change of town planning from a voluntary practice to a statutory practice as a profession was influenced by two factors. First, as Britain was losing its world dominance to Germany and USA both in military and economic terms, deteriorating urban condition became an alarming issue. Unfitness of urban volunteers for military service was very evident.<sup>2</sup> Second, the labour movement of the working class through mass unionism was causing serious strikes since the 1880s leading to social unrest. The working class was demanding not only higher wages but also better way of life in cities, better houses fit to live in.<sup>3</sup>

Proponents of the town planning movement maximised this policy window. They argued to the government that society could be stabilised through application of town planning principles of the Garden City. The principles afforded all classes the benefits of living harmoniously. The working class was to benefit from better housing in the suburbs. The industrialists were to benefit through a better workforce. The ruling class was to benefit through a stable society. So, town planning as a profession was born out of consensus of various classes. It is this establishment of harmony among various competing classes in cities through land use

planning that gave planning the value as a statutory practice in the local government.

However, the capital nature of the industrialists through landed interests proved very difficult to rationalize for harmonious co-existence with other systems of organizing cities. The social reform ideas of Morris and Howard did not succeed in reforming the land market effectively. The labour movement that led the working class politics was skeptical of town planning principles' ability to reform the urban land market, which was, regarded the source of all urban ills. Therefore, the consensus that gave birth to town planning as a profession was a weak one right from the beginning. While the capital that governed the land markets proved powerful and could not be reformed successfully, the labour movement of the social proved to be an impoverished energy to overcome the forces of capital.

Nonetheless, town planning was established as a profession. In Britain, the first town planning legislation was passed in 1909, the Housing, Town Planning &c. Act. This transformed planning from voluntary philanthropic activity of social reform into the field of state policy under the local government. It was a move from idealism to policy. The term 'town planning', which was, coined John S. Nettlefold, the Chairman of Birmingham Housing Committee in 1905 became an umbrella term for various reforms from housing to land and the garden city. Movements with controversial reformist ideas got a shelter to polish their ideas under towards acceptability.

The professionalization of town planning however raised a debate over who should practice it. Several professionals in the built environment were already practicing some aspects that fell under town planning. These included architects, civil engineers, and surveyors. In Britain, the pioneer, this led to establishment of the Town Planning Institute as

<sup>2</sup> See Read, 1972

<sup>3</sup> See Cadbury, 1915, p. 136

an inter-professional forum and the emergence of an independent town planning education in 1909 at Liverpool University's newly established Department of Civic Design. The argument by the city engineer of Birmingham, Henry Stilgoe in 1910 demonstrated the contentions that existed over who should administer the newly established town planning practice. His argument has proved more important than ever and it is worth quoting:

I think the people to administer it [the 1909 Housing, Town Planning &c. Act] will be the

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### 3. The Model of Equilibrium

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#### 4. Town Planning in the Transpolitical

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#### 4.1. Radical Antagonism of the Social

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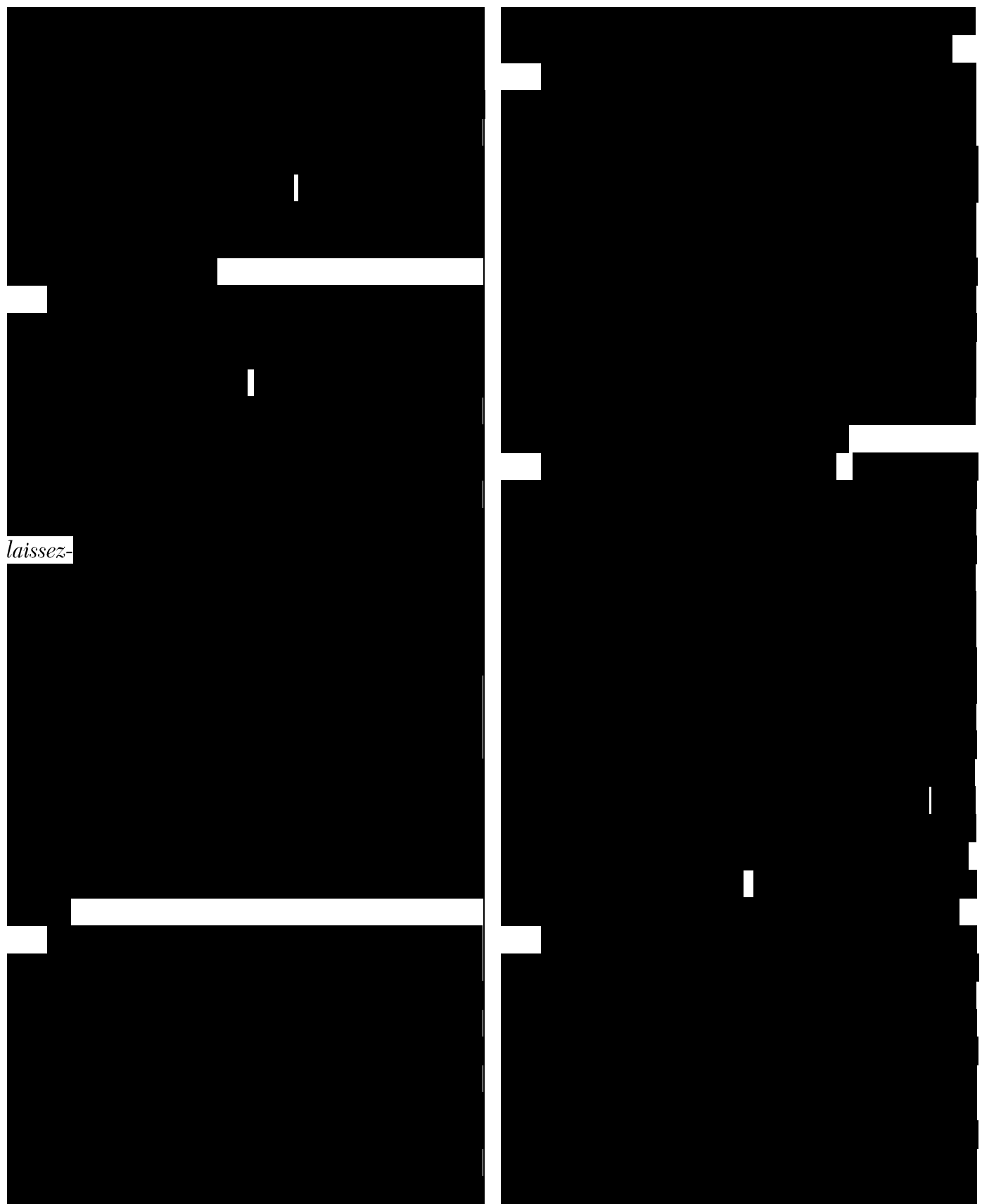
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#### 4.2. The Tyranny of the Capital

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### 4.3. The Pathology of Suburbia

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#### 4.4. The Disappearance of the Urban

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### 5. The Last Planners Standing

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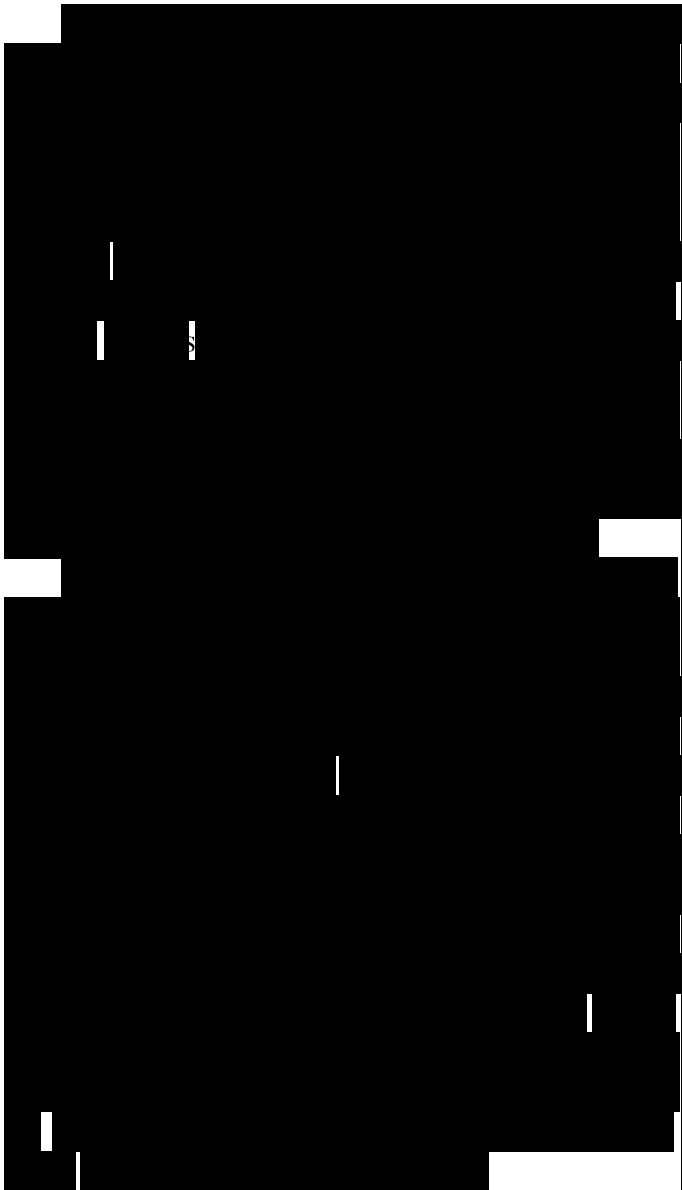
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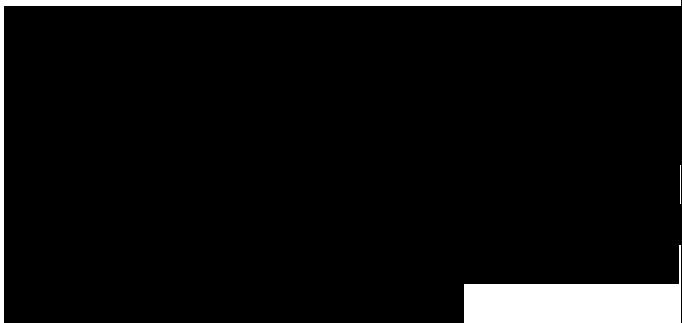
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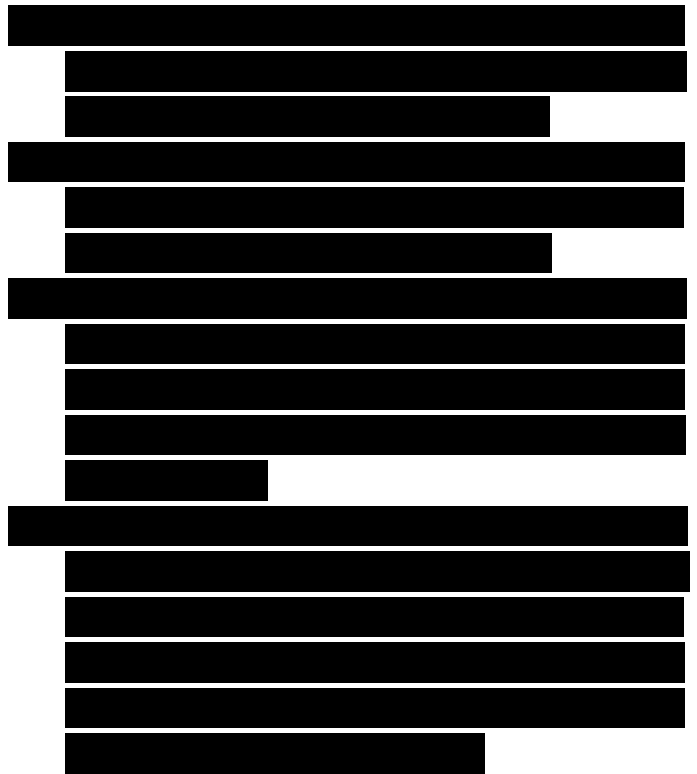
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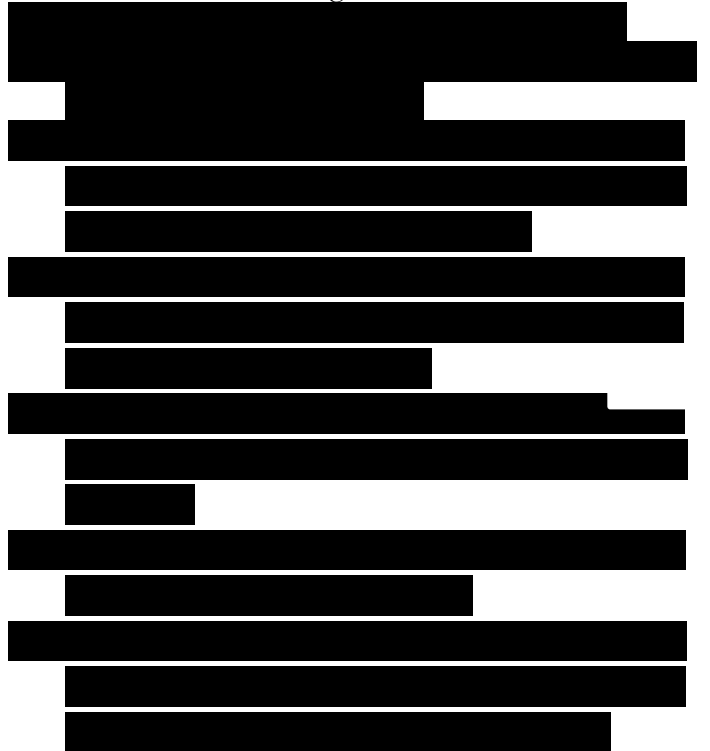
### About the Author



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