TRANSACTIONALISM AND THE GERMAN CITY

Edited by Jeffry M. Diefendorf & Janet Ward
Chapter Eight
Transatlantic Crossings of Planning Ideas: The Neighborhood Unit in the USA, UK, and Germany

Dirk Schubert

Planning ideas after World War II were based on similar visions worldwide. Many of them were developed half a century before, and the war offered a unique chance to put them into practice. Although there were different political systems and a diversity of urban situations, the planning models seem to have been similar in this period. There was an almost universal agreement that reconstruction combined with slum clearances would be necessary and would need to be planned rather than be left to the free play of the market. Planning was seen as the key to postwar rebuilding—for slum clearance, optimized land use, new housing production, and restructuring dense urban area based on the neighborhood principle.

It would not be too great an exaggeration to state that already in the decades before the war, a dominant urban design model had emerged advocating low densities, decentralization, and the structuring of the urban conglomeration with neighborhood units. For many reasons, it seemed to be absolutely necessary to restructure the dense, amorphous urban mass. Differences in the various examples of neighborhood types manifested themselves only in the local contexts of their (ideological) conception and in their built and architectural form. Simply clearing away inner-city slums and developing new housing estates was no longer enough for planners, who at conferences of the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning (in New York in 1925 and in London in 1935) established principles of how to structure large cities and paradigms of modern planning. Urban planners dreamed transnationally of “organizing communities” and neighborhoods to create a better new world.

Rarely has there been such international consensus among planners as that reached in the 1930s and 1940s on the concepts of urban restructuring and neighborhoods. The goal of restructuring the city by lowering densities and decentralization was internationally widespread. The method of achieving this aim, using smaller urban units and school units, was indeed a transnational phenomenon. It was the question of which form the city should actually take that caused national,
local contextual, and political opinions to drift apart. Some of the most important meccas that were based on the neighborhood unit theory are Tapiola next to Helsinki, Vällingby near Stockholm, Søndergaardsparken and Gyngemorung in Copenhagen, and Linda Vista in San Diego.¹ Robert Freestone analyzed examples of model settlements in Australia; Abdallah Abd El Aziz Atta studied settlements built on the principles of neighborhood units in Holland, Switzerland, Poland, and Germany and tried to transpose these principles to Baghdad and Cairo; Spencer E. Sanders and Arthur J. Rabuck documented the advantage of planned reconstruction; Steen Eiler Rasmussen and Paul Ritter discussed Scandinavian examples; and Eugen C. Kaufmann and A. I. Tarantul, for example, demonstrated the importance of the concept in the Soviet Union.²

This chapter will trace the origins of the neighborhood idea in Germany, Britain, and the USA, where the idea was first implemented. It became the most important planning paradigm after 1945 in Germany and in Britain. In the United States, the private market took over after World War II and only a few examples of neighborhood unit planning were privately developed, while in the United Kingdom and Germany, many examples were realized. Some of the most important examples of postwar reconstruction in London and Hamburg related to this planning idea will be analyzed here.

Origins of the Vision: Decentralization and Neighborhoods

Because similar ideas of decentralization were developed at the end of the nineteenth century in many industrialized countries, this shared background needs first to be contextualized. Social scientists identified processes leading to huge, crowded cities and the related phenomenon of “losing one’s roots” in those cities. The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) made an important distinction between “community” (Gemeinschaft) and “society” (Gesellschaft), of which the latter was dominant in the postindustrialization period. Tönnies defined community interaction as reliant on blood ties, neighborhood, and friendship, while societal interaction is based on evaluation of advantages, disadvantages, and expectations of reward. Family, clan, village, and friendship are forms of communities, whereas city and state are categories of society. “In large cities, that is in capitals and in the metropolis, the family is in decay…. Large cities typify society as such…. Therefore the city and the condition of society is the decline and death of the people,” Tönnies wrote, and lay the foundations for a hostile perception of large cities, a view that was fraught with consequences.³

Tönnies’s ideas soon spread internationally, become very influential among sociologists. Robert Ezra Park studied in Germany and later became the founder of the Chicago School of urban sociology. The American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley developed and based his differentiation of “communal” (“primary”) and “social” (“secondary”) groupings on the ones by Tönnies. The social reformer Robert A. Woods had lived in a settlement in London’s East End for a while and had started similar settlements in Boston, applying Tönnies’s ideas in the United States. The Chicago School’s human ecologists were concerned with organic relationships between human communities and their physical environment.⁴ Sociologists such
as Park and E. W. Burgess did extensive research on the city, social organization, "social surveys," "natural areas," and "community units," and how to establish and support neighborhoods as an important part of urban life. In 1891, Stanton Coit published work based on his experience in London and New York that encouraged the theory of neighborhood guilds.\(^5\) The ideas of neighborhood guilds, the settlement movement, and similar concepts were developed to organize the "social life of all people in one small district": "It thus brings neighbors together, families together, different interests together.\(^6\)

English Garden Cities have become case studies of how the vision of modern urban planning implemented decentralization concepts. Ebenezer Howard wanted to develop Garden Cities, not Garden Suburbs, and the structure of the Garden City would be based on school-centered wards as centers of community.\(^7\) He does not mention the term neighborhood, although the principles of the neighborhood unit idea formulated later are similar. In the United States, few projects were produced promoting the idea of creating a whole settlement until the 1920s.\(^8\) In 1906, the year Letchworth opened in Britain, the Garden Cities Association of America was founded. From 1909 onward, urban designers and planners in the United States held National Conferences on City Planning (NCCP), and in 1917 the American City Planning Institute (ACPI) was founded to address the necessity of planned urban expansion. Unlike in Britain, however, urban planning in the United States was not a direct result of the American Garden City, public health, or housing movements.\(^9\) It was primarily based on the City Beautiful and City Scientific movement as well as private initiatives.

Much of the experience of American planners had been obtained during World War I, when planning developed in the context of war-stimulated public housing programs.\(^10\) In 1923, the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) was formed in New York due to the driving force of Henry Wright as a rather informal, interdisciplinary think-tank of housing and town planning experts (including Catherine Bauer Wurster, Lewis Mumford, Benton MacKaye, Frederick L. Ackerman, Stuart Chase, Robert Kohn, Edith Elmer Wood, and Clarence S. Stein).\(^11\) They discussed the idea of state-wide regional planning, low-income housing, and in particular the concepts that could lead to the construction of such a settlement realizing their goals. The RPAA in New York anticipated the increasing social disintegration of the metropolis, as well as problems of unplanned suburbanization and urban sprawl, and countered these with planned decentralization, regional planning, and the establishment of neighborhoods.\(^12\)

RPAA member Clarence A. Perry formulated in the "Regional Survey of New York and its Environs" (1929) the basic physical design principles of a neighborhood unit. In "The Neighborhood Unit. A Scheme of Arrangement for the Family-life Community," Perry tried to transpose the positive experience of the settlement movement with its strong social links and networks that had partly strengthened the sense of community in existing residential areas onto a planning concept with neighborhood units in built-up areas, as well as new developments and urban expansion areas.\(^13\)

Although he drew from many sources, it was Perry who became known worldwide as the father of the neighborhood unit, constituted by six principles: "Size,
Boundaries, Open Spaces, Institution Sites, Local Shops, Internal Street System."

Perry's general principles included setting the ceiling population at 5,000 for an area surrounding an elementary school, placing services required on a daily basis along streets on the edge of the housing estate, especially at the nodes between neighborhoods, mandating the ability to reach central facilities on foot, rerouting through-traffic, segregating modes of transportation, using cul-de-sacs, and creating a green belt around the estate unit that separated it from other settlements. Perry predicted the need for new urban planning solutions because of the increase in private car ownership. "The cellular city is the inevitable product of the automobile age.... We are going to live in cells.... They require the organized neighbourhood." Perry developed a blueprint for urban development planning intending to avoid the negative aspects of the large city. Since he lived in the Garden Suburb Forest Hills on Long Island (Queens), he drew from personal experience in developing the model. Perry argued that the social mix of the population in the neighborhood units should be a "wide range of income classes," but a neighborhood nonetheless required a socially homogeneous population. Perry as well as others believed that a strong sense of community in a neighborhood was only achievable within groups similar in their ethnic, social—and above all racial—make-up.

In 1928, the City Housing Corporation bought a site in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, to translate Perry's theoretical framework into the built reality of Radburn that was expected to rise to model status on an international scale. Clarence S. Stein and Henry Wright were responsible for the architecture and planning; Thomas Adams, Raymond Unwin, Frederick Ackermann, and Robert D. Kohn were to serve as advisors. Three neighborhood units with about 25,000 inhabitants were planned, each built around an elementary school and all clustered around a single high school. The neighborhoods were designed in a way that children could walk to school. Because in 1929 automobiles killed more than one child per day on the streets of New York City, separating pedestrians from roads became a desirable design element in the neighborhood.

Not one element of the Radburn plan was truly new. It was a suburban model that promoted communal lifestyles and it was meant to meet modern demands such as private transportation. Although the planners had high hopes for the new sense of community, its inhabitants predominantly held conventional and conservative values. The urban planning typology was quite modern, but the architecture was traditional. Radburn became a mecca for planners, while the daily lives of the Radburnites conformed on the whole to those of other American suburban housing estates. Lewis Mumford, for example, praised the plan as the "first major departure in city planning since Venice." In May 1929, the first owners moved to Radburn, but by October of that year Wall Street crashed. Many Radburn inhabitants lost their jobs and incomes and had to move. Radburn was never completed and became a victim of the global recession. The transnationally applicable urban planning ideal turned into a financial disaster.

F. D. Roosevelt's New Deal gave rise to new opportunities for regional plans as intended by the RPAA, and the implementation of planned independent settlements that were modeled on Howard's vision and the example of Radburn. In 1934, the National Housing Act was passed and the Federal Housing Administration was
established, mainly concerned with creating employment. The degree to which
the FHA influenced model housing policies during the following decades cannot be
overestimated. It advanced suburbanization by building large suburban settlements
with neighborhood units. Neighborhoods according to the FHA were to be socially
and racially homogeneous in order to promote a sense of community among their
residents.

In 1935, a Greenbelt Towns concept was adopted by the US government, based
in part on the Radburn and Garden City models. It was aimed at creating jobs
and cheap housing as well as demonstrating new urban planning concepts. Rexford
Tugwell, a supporter of state intervention and planned decentralization and a fol-
lower of Howard's vision, became coordinator of the Resettlement Administration.
Initially, fifty Greenbelt Towns were planned; this was later reduced to eight, but
only three were built, with Greenbelt (Maryland) becoming the most well known.
Greenbelt Towns could not be compared to the English Garden Cities, as they were
smaller settlements of less than 1,000 households without places of work. Many
planners linked redevelopment and new housing estates with slum clearance and
demolition of old tenements. "The attack (on slum districts), however, can be indi-
rectly assisted by the development of model home neighborhoods in the suburbs just
as much as by replanning and rebuilding the slum areas themselves. No direct attack
on the slum districts will yield completely satisfactory results." Those in control
of housing policies, the building industry and developers, placed the emphasis on
the urban periphery, thereby causing the inner city to be neglected with negative
impacts for several decades.

In Britain, private developers dominated housing production after World War I.
Although some municipalities like the London County Council built a lot of new
housing on the city periphery between the wars, decentralization and spreading
the population across the whole countryside were considered the best solutions. For
example, in Becontree—the largest council (public housing) estate in the world—
25,000 dwellings were built to house over 110,000 people. But many found it dif-
ficult to adjust to the costs of suburban living. Many working-class people could
not afford the new public housing, while higher income groups preferred to buy
on the private market that enjoyed a much better image than council housing.
Therefore, many of the large housing estates became "one-class estates," a social
disaster, badly planned with dreary buildings, cultureless life, and people living in
an annoying monotony. It became clear that Becontree was not a "community,"
and it had no adequate local government and social infrastructure. Critics com-
plained about suburban commuting ghettos and vast dormitory deserts, and they
argued that housing had to be combined with community planning and structured
by neighborhoods, where people know each other and can have multiple types of
contacts.

In the initial plans for Becontree there had been some provision for social life
and recreation by creating neighborhood units. But owing to shortages of material
and labor, many of these ideas had to be abandoned. The "civic spirit" was miss-
ing and what was left had little in common with the famous Garden City idea of
decentralization. Critics in England complained about the absence of a social mix
in the new public housing estates: "The loss of neighborhood values has its further
bearing on socially disorganized areas." In this context, planners sought out different models of decentralization as ways to overcoming London’s overcrowded condition. In 1940, the Barlow Report (Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population) suggested a new spatial distribution of the industrial population in Britain and new towns with “mixed neighborhoods.” Lower densities in inner city areas were suggested, making rehousing operations necessary. World War II and the damage caused by bombing gave more and important support to the arguments for decentralization, lower densities, and neighborhoods, like the 1942 MARS Plan for London by the Modern Architectural Research Group: “Only by forming clearly defined units, which in turn are part of larger units can social life be organised.” The East End of London with its huge slum areas was to be remodeled with modern housing estates and neighborhoods.

Also, in the 1943 County of London Plan, London’s official plan, the neighborhood unit formed a central planning element. The plan prescribed extensive action, even in areas that had escaped destruction during the war. It foresaw new dimensions of rebuilding destroyed areas in accordance with the ideal of the neighborhood unit. “Partial solutions are not sufficient,” John Henry Forshaw and Sir Lesley Patrick Abercrombie wrote in the Foreword to the Plan; redevelopment and slum clearance on a big scale were mandatory. The planning goals were demonstrated, using a neighborhood unit in Shoreditch and Bethnal Green in the East End and the community of Eltham as examples. The redevelopment areas were to be similar in size to New Towns, which were developed in the framework of massive resettlement projects. They were to have 60,000–100,000 inhabitants, in neighborhood units of 6,000–10,000 people each. “The composite plans which we have prepared provide a proportion of lofty blocks of flats, spaced well enough apart for groups of trees, with terraced houses dispersed in regular but not monotonous form, the whole interspersed with open space and organically related to the smaller neighbourhood centre and finally the centre of the whole community.” The neighborhood units were envisioned as having open spaces and all necessary communal facilities.

Shortly after World War II began, discussion intensified regarding how postwar England should look. There was practically unanimous acceptance among planners for the necessity of large-scale redesigning of cities. Because of his preliminary work for the County of London 1943 Plan, Abercrombie, who worked for the Ministry of Country and Town Planning, was entrusted with the design of a plan for the Greater London area. Whereas the 1943 plan had concentrated on the administration area of the LCC, the new plan covered an area of a 30-mile radius from the City. One element of the 1943 plan to be developed further was the concept of organic communities. Abercrombie wrote:

Both the neighborhood and the town should be given physical definition and unmitakable separateness, and the population should be socially stable. This stability can largely be archived by the provision within the community of a variety of houses and dwellings to meet the needs of all population groups. . . . We have used the community as the basic planning unit. . . . Each community would have a life and character of its own, yet its individuality would be in harmony with the complex form, life and character of its region as a whole.
But it was not the neighborhood concept, in fact, but the community concept that was to serve as the basis for this new plan. The East End of London again served as a model for rebuilding according to modern principles of neighborhood planning. Abercrombie even thought that the buildings and dwellings in the slum areas of the East End that had not been destroyed by German bombs should be demolished anyway. Redevelopment areas were established and the plans were made to relocate the population as needed for implementing modern neighborhood units.

Deconcentration Strategies for Planning in Hamburg and Germany

In 1920s Germany, many large modern housing estates were built, such as those in Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, and Hamburg. The focus was on housing reform; community development was secondary. Although new schools were built and served as community centers, it was generally deemed more urgent to first solve the housing question by constructing many modern, healthy, well-ventilated apartments. As many of the units were too expensive for working-class people, most were rented by the rising class of white-collar employees. In Hamburg, many of the reform ideas were implemented by restructuring plans from the pre-World War I period to include parks, recreation areas, and more light and sun for the apartments. These housing estates were often built on land owned by the municipality, with a greater number of apartments in one estate to save costs. In Hamburg, they were termed a “belt” around the densely built-up inner city with its tenements from the nineteenth century.

During the Nazi dictatorship after 1933, housing and planning policy alike became a political and ideological issue. The National Socialists were primarily interested in good housing conditions for workers needed especially in the armaments industries; they condemned nineteenth-century housing as “speculative,” and found the new housing from the 1920s to still be “ugly tenements.” Many plans emphasized the poor urban environment and the need for improvement. The Nazi Party (NSDAP) saw a direct connection between urban planning, physical planning, and what it called Volk ohne Raum (Aryan) “people without space”). Urban design concepts drew upon the antiurban critique of large cities in the nineteenth century and postulated “de-densification.” “The city as the seat of Judaism” and “site of Marxism,” in the words of the leading National Socialist ideologue Gottfried Feder, was to be thinned out and reordered: “This urban organism will be composed of a series of cells, which will be grouped in cell associations within different sub-cores around the center of the city.” Feder suggested using the Vollenschule (combined elementary and lower secondary school) as a basis for creating order. By means of urban development, the “health of the body of citizens” could be achieved. Programmatic statements by the National Socialists called for a decrease of urbanization, or even its reversal in a migration back to the land. They were connected to ideas of autarky in an agrarian society, blood and soil, (de- and re-)population policies, and antiaircraft defense. Nonetheless, by the late 1930s, the Nazis had come to see large cities as a necessary evil.

American and English plans for neighborhood units had been presented at international conferences and sparked off discussion among German planners. Articles
about Radburn were published in German periodicals. In 1932, Clarence S. Stein's partner, Henry Wright, described his vision of the neighborhood idea to the German planning community in the journal *Die neue Stadt*. In 1934, Bruno Schwan also published a map and photographs of Radburn. For the Nazis, the challenge was how to apply the Anglo-American vision of neighborhoods so as to bring order to big German cities, to help in redesigning specially designated Führer-cities, and after 1939 to develop the newly conquered European “East” without merely imitating the “decadent” Western democracies. There were conflicts between the ideological claims of hostility toward the city, the ideal of an idyllic homeland, the reality of highly industrialized armaments production, and ideals of economic modernization. It was thought that the disintegration of large cities should be accelerated by new settlements for car owners. The conversion of cities to accommodate cars and the new settlement concepts were an integral part of the link between Nazi political power and spatial planning. Yet Hitler had to postpone mass-motorization as a secondary political goal for the time after the war that first had to be won. (In the USA, by contrast, car-based suburbs had already become reality during the interwar years.)

Likewise, Nazi planning principles for new settlements were to assume mass-motorization and transfer the framework of the political structure to town planning. The idea of the *Ortsgruppe als Siedlungszeile* (“local group as a settlement cell”) was a model that emerged from National Socialist theory and planning practice and adopted the neighborhood theory, but then used it to connote something completely different with a Nazi bias. Within this basic context, the emphasis could be placed upon the Germanic-national origins linking community with kinship, neighborhood, and camaraderie. In 1941, in Hamburg, the private architect Konstanty Gutschow, not the building or planning department of the city, was made responsible for town planning. In 1937, Hamburg’s boundaries had been extended into an amalgamation with the Prussian cities Altona, Wandbek, and Harburg. Most important however was the expansion of Hamburg’s port. This was to be intended to be far larger than the one of London because of increasing trade, the growing importance of Germany, and the new colonies Germany intended to acquire. When Gutschow made this plan, there was only minimal war damage, and he had grandiose ideas for the modernization of the city that included a new bridge over the river Elbe and the only new skyscraper Hitler would permit in Germany.

Gutschow’s 1941 urban development plan for Hamburg was based on the organizational principle of neighborhoods and followed the political structure of the party. Administrative units of the National Socialist German Workers Party were replicated in the planning of new housing estates in order to represent a cross section of German society, and excluded Jews and “unwanted” groups not belonging to the *Volksgemeinschaft*. A mixture of owner-occupied row houses, small blocks, and tenement buildings with flats for rent was planned. The *Ortsgruppe als Siedlungszeile*-estate was planned for about 6,000 to 8,000 people with schools, stores, and infrastructure. Gutschow declared: “The anonymity of the city is the result of an amorphic formation. It is necessary to make it more transparent again, to structure and design it to create order. For neighborhoods to evolve, the settlement units must be clearly set apart.”
The increasing war damage from 1940 onward gave the planners a unique chance to put their new ideas into practice; it offered opportunities for radical change. The plans mainly aimed at air defense, less monotony, decentralization, and the structuring and organization of cities by means of neighborhoods and residential areas. The home front was important and many promises were made, including plans for better housing and living conditions. The Nazis drew up plans for a massive public housing program after the war based on the exploitation of foreign workers. In the wake of destruction inflicted during the war, Gutschow created a second general plan for Hamburg in 1944. He was familiar with the central role of the neighborhood concept for British wartime reconstruction. The plan followed the principle of reducing housing densities, with local groups serving as neighborhood cells:

Every previous master plan for Hamburg that wanted to avoid the danger of becoming utopian and attempted to remain realistic had to take the existing physical situation in the central areas more or less for granted. A totally effective renewal, even if implemented gradually, was reserved for a very distant future, especially a reduction of the irresponsible population densities in the areas that had traditionally housed the Communist “electorate.” The new master plan is based on the reality of destruction and the entirely new possibilities it has offered... and the new master plan sees it as its task to build a city in which, despite its size, no national comrade [Volksgenosse] feels like a mere number, but is the member of a neighborhood.57

In plans for the destroyed areas, this concept was to form the basis for spacious rebuilding of residential areas in Hamburg.38 There are many more green areas and green belts in the plan dividing up the residential areas and neighborhoods. The plan is tabula-rasa style, creating new residential units. The urban fabric and bombed and destroyed areas were again divided into neighborhood units corresponding to the organization of the Nazi Party.

Local groups were to be used as a structuring element, not only in Hamburg and other cities, but also in the conquered eastern zones. Significantly, Heinrich Himmel, the Reichsführer of the SS, planned to use this same principle to “secure German national tradition in the new east.”39 Although neighborhood unit planning is a transnational product of various national roots and processes, Nazi German planners insisted that the idea offered a uniquely German solution. A great variety of different design models of neighborhood cells were developed, even if mostly unrealized. There were organic ones, like those of architect Hans Bernhard Reichow, or geometric ones by Walter Hirsch in 1944, with a mix of housing, densities, and of course a party building on a central axis.

If we compare the Plans for London to a 1944 plan for Hamburg by Gutschow’s colleague Reichow, the scheme looks very similar. Reichow’s organic “cells” appear different from the MARS Plan schemes. Reichow always used examples from the natural environment for his organic type of planning. He changed the names of his units: until 1945 he used the National Socialist term Ortsgruppe als Siedlungszelle, but later called them “organic neighborhoods.” If we take a more detailed look at two blitzed areas, we find that the plans for Shoreditch in London and Barmbek in Hamburg look very similar. Abercrombie’s thought was to demolish the slums of the East End, whether bombed or not; similarly in Hamburg, the postwar plan
for the area of Barmbek presumes a tabula rasa, creating new residential units and neighborhoods.

**Changing Terminologies and Planning Continuities in Postwar Germany**

After 1945, the term neighborhood gained a bad reputation in Germany because of the analogy to Nazi mechanisms of discipline and control. Thus the discredited concept of the “local group as neighborhood cell” was renamed as “cell” or “estate node” or “unit.” National Socialist town planning and architecture remained forbidden subjects of study for a long time after the war. In fact, the goals formulated after 1945 appeared similar to the pre-1945 vision, despite the denazification of terminology. The myth of the *Stunde Null* (“zero hour”) of 1945 as a completely new start was misleading. A degree of continuity occurred in both the people involved and in the planning paradigms. While some of the senior planners were removed from office or allowed to resign, most of the (pre-)war planners (“Gutschists”) did find new jobs and brought into the postwar period the models, concepts, and practices they had developed both during the Nazi era and before.40 Thus the “ideological ballast” of urban planning in Germany was shed after 1945, and the National Socialist idea of “local groups as neighborhood cell” was transformed into a western, democratically envisioned neighborhood unit called “estate node” in Hamburg. Although most of the grandiose party buildings and axes were not realized, German postwar reconstruction thus pursued some of the goals of the National Socialist period, as well as the goals of previous periods, even if the racial-political rationale was replaced by other appellations.

In 1946, Gutschow himself wrote in a letter to Rudolf Wolters, the former head of Albert Speer’s Ministry: “I have found, to my delight, my hobby, the idea of the residential cell in Abercrombie’s rebuilding plans. There they are called neighborhoods. They are the central idea of the plan... From now on these formations will be called, by my own defaming mouth, neighborhood cells. I hope they do not identify these urban design ideas, which are so dear to me, as an infiltration of the totalitarian pretensions of the party.”41 H. B. Reichow, having propagated the “local group as neighborhood cell” in Germany before 1945, later used biological metaphors and attempted to plan “organic neighborhoods.” Once employed by Gutschow during the Third Reich, he had no trouble morphing and depoliticizing National Socialist terminology into concepts derived from examples in nature. He used the term “branching” for creating a street pattern in postwar housing estates, and borrowed the idea of segregation of modes of transport from Radburn. His projects are regarded among the most influential in postwar West Germany and his books were bestsellers: *Organic City Planning* (1948) and *The Car-Suitable City* (1959) in which he primarily propagates the “Radburn principle.”42 He criticized the Abercrombie Plan and the London neighborhood unit plan for being insufficiently organic. Similarly, although more technocratic and lacking biologic analogies, the influential work *The Structured, Low-Density City* (1957) followed a comparable line of thought.43 Its authors did not disguise the fact that it was conceived during the National Socialist era and thus made no attempt to change the terminology.
One of them, Roland Rainer, pointed to the neighborhood theory as early as 1948 and published a translated version of the plans of Clarence Perry's Radburn. So there was a continuity of planning models based on the neighborhood unit, with many similarities between the expansive plans during the war and postwar ones.

In 1947, parts of Abercrombie's Greater London Plan were published in German. To offer the Germans more (democratic) examples of modern planning, a translation of Thomas Sharp's book on town planning was published in 1948 that also contained principles of the neighborhood idea. British military planners wanted to establish principles for rebuilding Hamburg similar to those of British cities. When the British occupation forces arrived in Hamburg in 1945 they were surprised at the parallels of planning ideas. The German visions for rebuilding in Hamburg were, in fact, modest in comparison with the ideas for London. The bombing damage had left a lasting impression on the losers and the political and economic insecurity did not allow for grand ideas. Nevertheless, Hamburg's general building plan of 1947 and rebuilding plan of 1950 contained the principles of neighborhood units and of relieving city monotony. Included in the plans were lower population densities and green belts to divide the residential neighborhoods.

New Housing Estates in Hamburg and London

In Britain, the war resulted in a modernization function, not only in terms of urban planning but also for British society and politics more generally. What was possible during the war was deemed possible for peacetime as well. The war taught Britons the value of good neighbors, and at the same time "opened up an unparalleled demand for experimentation and innovation." In turn, Hamburg's master architect of brick-based interwar Neue Sachlichkeit, Fritz Schumacher, called for extensive powers for planners to control the post–World War II land market. But financial difficulties and ownership problems hindered the realization of "great visions" in the inner city even when there was hardly any controversy between the planners about basic aims and models for rebuilding. The planners were forced to concentrate on lower population densities and on the planning and building of new estates. This was done according to the principles of neighborhood units on suburban edges as well as rebuilding bombed-out inner cities.

The housing shortage in Germany and especially in Hamburg, where half of the housing stock was blitzed, was dramatic. Housing projects began as soon as the political and financial situations were stabilized. The first major project in Hamburg was for the British Army's headquarters in its occupation zone. In the area selected for the project, there had been a prewar total of 185 buildings with about 730 apartments. In this period of dire housing shortages, buildings in the area were even demolished to make space for the new project. Most of the sites could be acquired by negotiations with the former owners.

The British Military Forces wanted an architectural competition for the Grindelberg project. The competition was won by a group of architects from Hamburg (B. Hermkes, R. Jäger, R. Lodders, A. Sander, F. Streb, F. Trautwein, and H. Zeiß). The project included 12 skyscrapers and was planned with offices and apartments for British officers; there were to be 6 buildings each with 15 floors, and
another 6 each with 10 floors. The estate constituted the first and unique example of high-rise buildings with this scale. Although there had been some proposals like Mies van der Rohe’s skyscraper for Berlin, the modernist steel-frame construction methods were new in Germany. But a controversy arose about high-rise buildings, about “Hamburg’s Manhattan.” While some architects argued this would be a unique chance for a new start, others preferred lower buildings. For the people of Hamburg, the debate over the Grindelberg high-rises soon became a symbol for rebuilding according to modern ideas and standards. In England the Architects’ Journal explained it as newly discovered project of Le Corbusier, and did not mention the local architects involved.

In Hamburg, there was a shortage not just of steel but of all building materials shortly after the war. When the British Government decided to move their military headquarters to Bad Oeynhausen, Hamburg’s city government refused to take over the project that was still under construction. Finally in 1948 the Hamburg parliament agreed to complete the project as public housing. Over 2,000 apartments were built between 1949 and 1956, and because of the housing shortage there was a big demand for them.

The high-rise project of Grindelberg departed from the basic neighborhood mix of densities and housing types. The flats were standardized and the buildings had only two different heights. But all amenities were included: stores, laundry, the borough Town Hall, and a gas station. Sculptures were positioned in green zones and playgrounds for children were included away from traffic. As the rents were quite high, not many working-class people could afford to live there. Since the buildings of the estate were easy to distinguish from the surrounding areas, the tenants developed a unique, positive identity for their vertical neighborhood.

A decade later, a handbook was published by the Hamburg Ministry for Building, Housing and Settlements that explained the guidelines for planning new housing estates. The family was to serve as a basis, followed by a neighborhood of 6–10 families forming an initial settlement unit. Three to five of these small units would form settlement groups, which in turn would lead to a school unit for 5,000–7,000.\(^7\) Although different terminology was used, the key unit for structuring the city remained the same.

One of the biggest housing projects in West Germany was implemented in the Hamburg district of Altona after 1958. About 90,000 people lived in Altona’s Alstadt before the war. Most of the buildings were demolished by bombing, especially in Altona’s eastern area, where about 60 percent of the housing stock was destroyed. In 1955, planning started with a team from the planning department of the City of Hamburg, including Werner Hebebrand, Otto Sill, and Arthur Dahn, as well as the Neue Heimat, the biggest housing company in Germany. Architect Ernst May was the head of the planning group in the Neue Heimat, and he had extensive planning experiences from Frankfurt am Main, Breslau, the Soviet Union, and Africa. In the ten years since the war, some buildings had been erected without planning permission, some had been modernized, and others had become squats. The plans for Neu-Altona included the demolition of many older buildings. New roads were planned, with an increase of green space from 2 to 15 percent in the area.
New housing was to avoid the old mix of housing and business on one plot. These planning visions followed the Charter of Athens with a clear separation of housing and working spaces. The density was to be lowered to about 500 people per hectare and the area structured by neighborhoods. Although it was not possible to separate neighborhoods completely from each other because of existing streets and industries, individual solutions were to be created to give the metropolitan dweller a sense of his or her local neighborhood and establish a human scale in the anonymous big city.48

If we compare these Hamburg projects with a counterpart in London, Churchill Gardens in Pimlico, they seem to be very similar. Designed by two young architects P. Powell and H. Moya, who won the competition, for the Westminster City Council in 1946, it was planned as a neighborhood unit from the start. Churchill Gardens was a mixed development of 1,600 homes: ten-story blocks of apartments, four-story maisonnettes, and a few three-story terraced houses for large families (“anglicized Gropian Zeilenbau”). Social infrastructure, schools, stores, and a community center were integrated into the project. A view to the Thames was offered for most of the tenants. The monotony of the LCC’s prewar housing estates was avoided by a mix of building heights. Churchill Gardens was an important demonstration of the successful use of modern architecture for housing.

The 1951 Festival of Britain, in the tradition of the 1851 Great Exhibition, was a demonstration with great international potential for British reconstruction, but its resonance was primarily destined for the home front. The South Bank side of the Thames chosen for the festival was far from optimal. But a demonstration project for modern housing was developed in the East End as a “Live Architecture Exhibition.” The first Compulsory Purchase Order was made for the Lansbury Estate area in Stepney in 1949. Part of the Stepney-Poplar Comprehensive Development Area with a population of approximately 100,000 inhabitants, Lansbury was the first project to be developed both comprehensively and on a neighborhood basis. The layout of the area was prepared by the LCC’s Architects Department, and also many private architects were involved. Its neighborhoods were each planned with a number of social facilities, such as day care and schools, two churches, a pedestrian shopping center, and public open space. A maximum of housing types was offered: six- and three-story apartments, four-story maisonnettes, three- and two-story terraced houses, and houses with apartments overhead. The exhibition area of Lansbury was intended as a demonstration of new types of neighborhood planning and new types of houses, apartments, and maisonnettes for Londoners. Lewis Mumford counted the estate as “one of the outstanding examples of postwar urban planning.”49

However, before very long the results of Lansbury were criticized as a “major disaster” not just by observers but also by tenants, who found it hard to overcome their aversion to tenements (“model dwellings for the poor”) as well as to the relatively high density.50 The Lansbury people were displaced by East Enders with their specific socio-(sub)cultural traditions. Most were dependent on nearby industries and port activities. Moreover, the romantic vision of social mixing did not function well in practice. A group of middle-class Lansbury dwellers had problems with the social homogeneity and solidarity of the impoverished East Enders.
The Neighborhood Planning Vision: Divergences and Convergences

Urban renewal combined with (slum) clearance may appear as excellent examples of a transnational postwar consensus. All parties strongly supported the ideas of clearing unhealthy housing and the visions of modern housing—as public housing—with light, air, electricity, and sun in the neighborhood units. Nonetheless, the key problems could not be resolved. A gap remained between the accommodation that poorer households could afford and architects' notions of minimum levels of acceptable housing conditions. State intervention only widened this gap, in fact, when on the one hand slums were demolished with compensation paid to the landlords, and on the other hand new subsidized council housing, neighborhoods with schools, and social infrastructure were built using public subsidies. It became prohibitively expensive to fully compensate private owners, and so parts of the old underground infrastructure often had to be used. The neighborhood unit principle was easier to achieve for new estates on the urban periphery. Thus it can be concluded that the neighborhood idea was not that important for rebuilding inner cities and built-up areas. Not surprisingly, then, in the early 1950s, the focus of reconstruction shifted to the periphery. Social housing was assigned the task of solving the problem of housing shortages: large, often prefabricated housing estates were the result.

World War II promoted modernization, necessitating government interventions in economics, society, and planning. A core element of this “modernization” became the expansion of housing programs of urban renewal. Planning ideas from the war’s victor, the United States, became more important in Europe. Even representatives of the Modern Movement, such as Walter Gropius, supported the neighborhood theory and the goals it denoted. He stated that lower densities and not the complete diffusion of the city were the goal of organic neighborhood planning. Yet it soon seemed quite clear that architects’ and planners’ “grand visions” of population dispersal from the dense inner city areas to the suburbs could only partially be put into practice. Problems of landownership, building costs, and all the problems of creating a social new community from scratch made the implementation of such visions ultimately impossible.

The worldwide planning euphoria of the 1960s produced technocratic models that ultimately reduced the neighborhood theory to a technical, organizational norm. Planners became unpopular and their work unspectacular; the inspiration of the 1940s had gone. Spawned by new variants, the international planning movement acquired greater diversity. The legendary charismatic figures of the first postwar generation with their visionary, even missionary ideas departed the scene. International organizations dealing with planning matters remained quite small (International Federation for Housing and Planning, IFHTP; International Union of Local Authorities, IULA; and International Congresses of Modern Architecture, CIAM), but offered regular opportunities for exhibitions, tours, and conferences. The future trends of urban change, slum clearance, and planning the welfare state became dominated by the United States, but the Netherlands and Scandinavia also became transnational models.

In the 1960s, a big demand for office space made the extension of central business districts necessary, including a reorganization of areas next to city centers and the demolition or conversion of housing from the nineteenth century for office use.
Inner cities lost their population base, and the discussion about urban slum clearance came to the fore again. Slum clearance has often meant the displacement of an existing low-income population, creating space for more profitable office, commercial, and luxury residential development, or the provision of transport facilities. \(^{54}\)

Urban redevelopment and gentrification became the new paradigms, along with urban rehabilitation and revitalization, and, in the 1970s, the "inner cities debate."

Without a doubt, the neighborhood concept has functioned as "one of the major landmarks in shaping urban form during the twentieth century" and beyond. \(^{55}\)

Important contemporary planning movements like "New Urbanism" and "Smart Growth" in North America also explicitly refer to the neighborhood theory, trying to implement higher densities, mixed-use developments, public transportation, and defining an optimal size of the neighborhood based on walking distances. \(^{56}\) But in the end, the chief reason for the success of the neighborhood idea has been the social homogeneity of the areas, not the intended heterogeneous mix or even the physical layout. \(^{57}\) The planning theory of neighborhood units always had a technical instrumentalist side to it, manifesting its design paradigm in traffic segregation, cul-de-sacs, housing layouts, and infrastructure. But it also contained rather less transparent elements of social engineering, antiurban ideology, political visions, and sociological implications. Hopes were continually raised and dreams nurtured, making the idea so successful, similar to that of the Garden City concept. This proved to be the downfall of the theory as well. The neighborhood has not shown itself to be resistant to instrumentalization in all kinds of different political contexts, or to misuse for purposes of social control and behavioral manipulation directed at greater order and lucidity in planned parts of the metropolis.

**Notes**


8. Henry Wright wrote: “There was still the desire to see what might be done in the United States, comparable to Letchworth and Welwyn, given a free hand.” Wright, *Rehousing Urban America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 45.


12. Some members of the RPAAs found proof in the German apocalyptic bestseller by Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (1918), for the process of cultural disintegration in the Western world. See Sussman, *Planning the Fourth Migration*, 228.


16. “On the whole, however, Forest Hills Gardens, as it is, constitutes an excellent illustration of a new type of urban community. The fine quality of neighborly social life it has produced obviously has its roots in a real-estate plan….” Perry, “The Neighborhood Unit,” 100. See also Silver, “Neighborhood Planning in Historical Perspective,” 166.

17. The presumption that planning concepts for neighbourhood units induce a homogeneous population structure was later explicitly formulated by the Chicago planner Reginald R. Isaacs in the article “‘The Neighborhood Unit’ is an Instrument for Segregation,” *The Journal of Housing* 5, no. 8 (1948): 215–218, 215.


21. There were two building programs under the Emergency Relief Appropriation (ERAA) of 1935: “(1) the Rural Resettlement Programme, which attempted to stem rural migration by building economically viable rural communities; and (2) the Suburban Resettlement Programme, which was designed to create alternatives to the urban slum.” Carol Corden, Planted Cities: New Towns in Britain and America (Beverly Hills, CA and London, UK: Sage Publications, 1977), 52.


39. Regarding the newly conquered areas of Eastern Europe, Himmler announced: “In the design of housing areas, schemes on a massive scale should not be allowed to take over. Instead, homely settlements for the promotion of the common good should be created in the interest of urban design... The criteria for the structure of housing areas, with a view towards developing the community, can be drawn from the same source that guides the political structure of the Volksgemeinschaft (the community of all Germans in the National Socialist sense). The structure of housing areas must thus, as far as possible, confirm with the political organizational structure of the Volksgemeinschaft, organised in cells, local groups, and districts. The urban form appropriate to the local group would, in this sense, consist of small cells and ultimately in small scale streets,


52. When the (German-born, American) planner Hans Blumenfeld was invited to Germany in 1949 he reported a lack of coherent, centrally directed long-range planning. See Jeffry M. Diefendorf, Axel Frohn, and Hermann-Josef Rupieper, eds., *American Policy and the Reconstruction of West Germany, 1945–1955* (New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 338.


