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## Peaceful paths to real reform?

The origins of the New Towns movement (and the TCPA) stem from Ebenezer Howard's seminal book *Garden Cities of To-morrow*.<sup>1</sup> But that was not its original title – the 1898 book was entitled *To-morrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform*.<sup>2</sup> That original title has a significance for the TCPA today. Howard wrote this book in response to the socio-political context of his time; there was an increasing gulf between the rich and poor, with the potential for this to ignite into civil disorder; millions were trapped in poor housing, unable to afford anything better; new technologies were rapidly emerging that upset the old order of things (motor vehicles, electricity, even flying machines); and there was a distrust in conventional politics with both socialist and autocratic models espoused. Added to this, the global context was one of mass migration and growing political instability; Britain was involved in foreign wars and fears were growing that a major war might break out. Doesn't that sound rather like the here and now? So, what did Howard do? He took what today we might view as a structural socio-technological analysis to provide an alternative approach to a key issue – Britain's dysfunctional urban infrastructure. Let's look at that title again.

Howard rejected the stance advocated by extremists for violent revolution or the total destruction of the existing order. He did not believe that this would produce '*Real Reform*' (and history has proved him right in that). Instead, Howard sought a transition path that could be initiated within existing structures, institutions and economic relationships. Today we might call his approach 'strategic niche management',<sup>3</sup> whereby the Garden Cities were learning trials to perfect a new type of settlement so superior to traditional cities that they would initiate a regime change to a more equitable blended town/country settlement pattern. The '*Real Reform*' was the destination to which the '*Peaceful Path*' was designed to lead. The physical design of the Garden City was only one part of this – the key factor was around Howard's concept of land value being captured by a local community trust and used to fund infrastructure and provide affordable housing for all. The '*Real Reform*' was the socio-economic development model underpinning the Garden City concept.

In our Future Urban Environments group here at The Open University, we have been exploring the regime transforming opportunities of new digital technologies. One example reported in this Journal<sup>4</sup> is the development of demand responsive transport within the existing public transport regime in Milton Keynes. Our present transport systems are problematic in numerous ways. They consume vast amounts of non-renewable resources – a major source of global warming emissions. They engender unhealthy lifestyles and contribute significantly to poor air quality. Cleaner electric vehicles and driverless technologies might be insufficient to tackle these issues if applied within the old mobility regime. So, we are exploring the transition paths to how such transport technologies can lead to new system designs. Such transformative potential is what is needed rather than using new technologies to patch up our old systems.

Let's pick up Howard's approach of identifying transition paths to a socio-technical regime change to identify how new technologies and business models can be applied to our urban systems and the institutional changes needed for transformative change. Trials, knowledge exchange and other learning opportunities can help to identify transition paths towards something that really will address the key challenges of the upcoming decades. Let's find today's '*Peaceful Paths to Real Reform*'.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> E Howard: *Garden Cities of To-morrow (being the second edition of To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform)*. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Ltd, London, 1902.

<sup>2</sup> E Howard: *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Ltd, London, 1898. Full text available to view at:

<https://archive.org/details/tomorrowpeaceful00howa/page/4/mode/2up>

<sup>3</sup> J Schot, FW Geels: 'Niches in evolutionary theories of technical change'. *Journal of Evolutionary Economics*, 2007, Vol.-17,-605–622. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00191-007-0057-5>

<sup>4</sup> S Potter, M Valdez, M Enoch, M.-Cook: '-Demand-responsive transport returns to Milton Keynes - lessons for a bus industry in crisis?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2022, Vol. 91, Sep./Oct., 319-329