The diffusion of the term “Garden-City”: some issues on the transfer of town planning models in Brazil

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Since the beginning of Letchworth’s building, in 1903, until the more recent formulations of Richard Rogers, for example, the diffusion of the garden-city set of ideas knew a trajectory that marked the town planning thought and practice along the twentieth century. By observing the vast construction of cities or expansion areas – neighborhoods, especially – that were named garden cities, one can ask which mechanisms allowed for the success and fast application or materialization of this set of ideas. The valorization of the low population density standard of growth in the suburbs? The reduction of the original concept to an easily reproducible formal scheme? The discussion on the process of transference of town planning ideas establishes some parameters that help understand these questions. Specially, the graduation of Brazilian technicians in foreign institutions and the hiring of foreign professionals, as Barry Parker in the 1910s, are some ways to understand the circulation of town planning cultures. However, one cannot understand the reach of the garden-city term’s diffusion without discussing the relationship between its forms of materialization and the original formulations established by Howard back in the late nineteenth century. This work discusses this relationship, thus interrelating the processes in which the transference and the assimilation of town planning ideas and models took place, based on the case of Brazil. The narrative axes of this paper helps to uncover some of the main mechanisms of this process of transference and diffusion in Brazil: the hiring of foreign professionals, the significant reference of their planning accomplishments for the local technical environment and the influence in the formation of new professionals, such as the engineer Jorge de Macedo Vieira; the appropriation of the garden city model by the town planners with polytechnic education as an instrument for the building of healthy and beautiful cities, based on the performance of the engineer Lincoln Continentino; finally, the shift of the garden city term into garden neighborhood and their meanings based on the analysis of the Natal’s Master Plan (1929-1930) by the Greek Italian architect Giacomo Palumbo. It also points to the form in which the term was appropriated in a debate that overcame the professional and technical limits, becoming involved in the local political disputes and interests. This fact would often aggregate new meanings to the term and promote a definitive severance towards the ideas of social reform that marked the original conceptions of the garden city.
Among the several recommendations for a healthy urban environment established by physician Alfredo da Matta, who worked in the field of medical geography, there is one which does not seem to be in tune with his analysis of the urban environment of the Amazonian capital city. “Let us keep on building Garden Cities” (Matta, 1916, p.91), states the physician, before and after signaling to the importance of the great parks and gardens for outdoor living and for public health of the English and North-American cities.

The statement appears to be, however, a synthesis of his most general recommendations urging for an urban as well as a social (and racial) reform in Brazil, and it actually reflects the Brazilian technical-intellectual arena at that time. As one can gather by analyzing the action of intellectuals, physicians, engineers and town planners, only a healthy urban environment would allow for the overcoming of the atavistic difficulties of the nation. Matta (1916, p.92) writes: “It is only by this means that the vigor and the perfection of the race, the defense and security of our lands will be achieved; Brazil’s power, prosperity and wealth.”

This episode of the history of the ideas and practices on Brazilian cities serves as an introduction to some issues that make up the objective of this article: to discuss the diffusion of the term “garden city” in Brazil, focusing on the manners town planning models and their ideas were transferred into the country and, especially, their appropriation by the national elites.

The mention of the term “garden city” appeared in the medical geography by Alfredo da Matta, in 1916. It anticipates that which is considered to be the most decisive, influential moment to the propagation of the garden city’s concept and ideas in Brazil, that is, when Barry Parker worked in the country between 1917 and 1919.

There is no interest to reveal earlier signs or to identify the very first moment of reference to the garden city idea in Brazil. On the contrary, the quotation of the garden city in the medical text reveals the undeniable success and broad scope of these ideas’ diffusion, not only in Europe, but also in the Americas and even in Asia and Oceania (Ward, 1992). A success which is due to both the “unique combination” of reformist proposals as published by Ebenezer Howard in 1898 and to his intense effort to put them into practice and make them viable – elements which lay the basis for what could be considered the Garden City International (Andrade, 1998). Howard’s ideas were adapted in the design of Hampstead (1909) by Raymond Unwin, who developed the notion of the garden suburb. By the way, the development from the garden city to the garden suburb, more than indicating the rise of satellite-towns, would be considered the decisive moment, the “great apostasy” as put by Peter Hall, for the conception of urban spaces with bizarre and, at times, even catastrophic results (Hall, 1995, p. 04, 124-157).

Alfredo da Matta’s quotation can also reveal a dialectic relationship which is crucial to the understanding of the transfer processes. From one side (the emission), although gestated in a specific historical time and geographical space, proposals of urban and social transformation invariably have a universalizing pretension of expanding and transporting itself to distinct realities. Howard, for example, proposed schemes and outlined general considerations with the explicit intention of creating an adaptable model. The disclaimers – such as “plan must depend upon site selected” or “plan cannot be drawn until site selected” – that are attached to the diagrams illustrating his book are a small example of this assertive.

It cannot be ignored that, as Mumford emphasized, Howard established no architectonical or urban design details on his proposal because he did not wish the essential issues discussed to
be confused or mixed with any visual image (Mumford, 1998, p.559). Additionally, despite emphasizing the priority of the site over the plan, he did not support a “picturesque town planning”, of respect to topography, sinuous urban layout, of medievalist-inspired architecture, etc., as put by Unwin on “Town Planning in Practice” (1909). After all, as indicated in the variant to the first edition of Howard’s book, the modern techniques of engineering could render this priority unnecessary (Howard, 1996, p.203).

On the other side (the reception), the imported ideas and models only bloom if they find a “community of senses”, as put by Murilo de Carvalho (1990), that can validate their concepts and elements; that is, they dialogue to each other and somehow converge with the issues posed by the pre-existent technical and cultural arena. Thus, the transfers fit into the time of each city, region or country and depend, in great measure, on the individual trajectories of the technicians and cultural mediators that dedicated themselves to the issue of cities (Salgueiro, 2001).

In Brazil, especially, the garden city model would find and produce resonance on the ideal of urban healthiness that marked the professional performance mostly of the “sanitationist town planning”, as we will discuss further ahead. And, one can suggest through the appropriation of the term in the medical geography of Manaus, it became a synthetic reference to think the possibility of building a healthy city below the tropics.

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In 1949, Frederic J. Osborn proposed, at the foreword of Howard’s third edition book, a definition to the term garden city, based on that one adopted by Garden Cities and Town Planning Association in 1919: “A Garden city is a Town designed for healthy living and industry; of a size that makes possible a full measure of social life, but not larger; surrounded by a rural belt; the whole of the land being in public ownership or held in trust for the community” (Osborn, 1949, p.26). As Howard himself was asked to this kind of dictionary entry, it is noted the emphasis on the urban side of his propose, the need of the agricultural green belt, and of the public domain of the land.

Worried with the diffusion of many ideas and terms that were originated by Howard’s book and, worse, with the “perversions of good words by commercial and demagogic interests” (Osborn, 1949, p.28), the terminology compiled by Osborn reveals an effort to systematize and separate, at least at the town planning literature, the original idea of the variants that, rightfully or not, was originated from there. The perversion or degeneration theme, the key of the debate on historiography with reference to the process of transfer and appropriation of town planning ideas and models, can also reveals the political fights for the knowledge and powers on the cities and, also, the possibilities of make concrete of each idea and model face to each city, region or country reality.

So, it is not intended to read at this work the many means of appropriation of the term garden city as simple disparagement to the original believe. On the contrary, the three narrative axis proposed to structure this article aid to uncover some of the mainly mechanisms – the actors and institutions, and others – that built this transfer and diffusion process in Brazil. The episode of Parker’s come to Brazil, in the end of 1910’s decade, for example, allows to discuss one of the most evident manners of transfer: the hire of a foreign professional that, through his projects, build a significant reference of urban realizations to the local technical arena and, consequently, influences, directly or indirectly, the learning of new professionals, as the engineer Jorge de Macedo Vieira.

The appropriation of garden city model by the town planners that had a polytechnic
education shows, at this time as, more than the social reform proposals of transformation, what was interesting was an environmental scheme of urban design (Ward, 1992) with a quality that served to the needs of the modern urban culture in formation in Brazil. The garden city became another element to the building and to the legitimization of local professional debate, a powerful tool to raise healthy and beautiful cities, as it is possible to discuss from the performance of the engineer Lincoln Continentino – the second axis of analysis.

Finally, as the third axis, it is discussed the shift of the term garden city to garden neighborhood, reduction that, for times, brought with it a whole of meanings that related itself to the original idea, as it can be observed at the discussions around the Natal’s Master Plan, elaborated by the Greek Italian architect Giacomo Palumbo, between 1929 and 1930. If one term is taken by the other, the emphasis of the garden in the city is kept as a synonym of an urban space adjusted to the comfort of modern life requirements.

The proposed starting point for analyzing this transfer process is the hiring of the English architect Barry Parker by Cia. City in São Paulo, and the subsequent influence of his performance in the trajectory of some Brazilian professionals that assimilated and diffused the garden city idea throughout the country. His performance represented, according to Andrade (1998), the primary manner of insertion of this model in Brazil. Between 1917 and 1919, Parker proposed a new occupation of the urban site and a new urban layout, which would bring new elements to the constitution of urban landscapes, as well as promoting rich debates among the local professionals and intellectuals with reference to the town planning culture that was being established in a practical and present way.

In Brazil, the debate was based in the knowledge and the reference to a solid town planning set of ideas known around the world, and was influenced by the several lines of development of the garden city model. Parker diffused the consolidation of the garden suburb idea – particularly the garden neighborhood, in Brazil –, an urban design solution adopted and divulged by him and his associate Unwin in Hampstead. Despite the criticism on the departure from the Howardian essence, this process of transposition from the garden city idea to garden suburb, spearheaded mainly by the theoretical formulations of Unwin on 1909, allowed for the characterization of an innovative urban form under the Brazilian conditions. Specially with the concretization of the principles of urban layout and design defined by Parker in São Paulo’s garden neighborhoods, such as in Jardim América (Image 01). Even if it did not promote the planning of the global and self-sufficient city, as Howard had originally proposed, it attracted the sight of technicians and administrative authorities to the occupation of urban expansion areas (Andrade, 1998) and represented the appropriation of a specific set of characteristics.

Through the projects of the architect, Cia. City set a town planning standard which had its layout reproduced in his following real estate undertakings. It is worth noting that this formulation had in Brazil a favorable field for absorption and acceptation. The debate on the Howardian conception and his reinterpretations was present in meetings and class conferences, while Barry Parker’s accomplishments were notorious references among the town planners.

The engineer Jorge de Macedo Vieira, an exponent of the garden city model in Brazil, is considered a disciple and successor of Parker’s work. When Parker worked in Cia. City, Vieira was a trainee for that company. Vieira admitted that this experience was fundamental to his future professional life; having decided, from that moment on, to dedicate himself to the urbanization of land parcels (Steinke, 2002, p. 83).

One brief analysis of Vieira’s work shows his active participation in the building of São
Paulo city, as well as other Brazilians cities, between 1917 and 1967. He diffused the garden neighborhood residential type and, among other works, he executed in the city of São Paulo the following projects: Jardim Japão, Parque da Moóca, Vila Maria, Nova Manchester, Jardim da Saúde. In the state of Paraná, he developed the urban projects of Maringá, Pontal do Sul, Cianorte, and others. An important example is the project to the city Águas de São Pedro - SP (Image 02), which features a sinuous urban layout adjusted to the local wavy topography, a “park way” along two parks, and areas designated for planting trees (Steinke, 2002, p. 155).
The reports of his projects reveal some of the formal urban principles adopted along his professional practice. Among them, are emphasized aspects dealing with the urban healthiness theme and references to the expansion of cities, such as: orientation of blocks and parcels for better reception of sunlight; minimization of topographic changes during construction; definition of the urban layout based on the topography of the terrain; advantageous use of visuals; the presence of the gardens, squares and parks; pedestrian-only streets, and others. In the projects of hydro-mineral ranches Macedo Vieira advocated a low density and the predominance of outdoor spaces, for walks and sports practice. It is worth mentioning that the sinuous urban layout, usually present in Vieira’s designs, did not represent an immutable pattern. Plain or low-declivity terrain allowed for the conception of original geometric designs as in Pontal do Sul (Image 03).

In his speeches, however, Vieira declares the reason of his partial departure from the orthogonal solution in his urban proposals. In spite of the influence of Parker and the Cia. City in Vieira’s formation, this attitude represents the importance of a technical background in this professional, graduated as civil engineer on the São Paulo City Polytechnic School (1917), showing unique and peculiar apologies to the adoption of garden city model. The acceptance of the modern town planning principles by Vieira is also related to the knowledge of works such as Camillo Sitte’s, Stübben’s, Howard’s, Unwin’s and Nelson Lewis’s, present in his private library (Steinke, 2002).
In this process of urban modernization and application of the garden city model in Brazil, special attention is due to the professional performance of Lincoln Continentino, who attained a degree in civil engineering, in 1923, at the Belo Horizonte Engineering School and undertook specialization courses in sanitation engineering in the University of Harvard, between 1927-1929 (Leme, 1999). His formation as a sanitation engineer, probably allowed him a peculiar insight regarding the assimilation of the garden city model, incorporated into the current discussion on urban unhealthiness.

Continentino supported in his projects the adaptation of the urban layout to the site, this preventing the great land movements (“which give out an unpleasant impression” and had higher costs) and a street layout system that adapted to the sanitary networks, as well as supporting the effective utilization of dividable ground and the drainage of waters. He intended to produce a healthy environment, with verdant streets and frequent ventilation, precepts that were widely diffused by the sanitationist and ideas regarding medicine of that time. Many of these concepts rooted in the sanitationist set of traditional ideas since the late nineteenth century in Brazil were extended into the following century by the debates regarding the urban problems and, particularly, associated by the local professionals with the garden city model. Continentino, in a clear association of hygienic and engineering technical principles, links the garden city theme to aspects of valorization of green areas and gardens, fundamental in the conception of healthy cities, as well as emphasizing the importance of engineering in the structuring of a city both functional and pleasant:

The secondary streets can present curved sections that simultaneously constitute an obstacle to the intense traffic of vehicles and a diversion from the monotonous system of an orthogonal street layout or other geometrical shape. In the cases recommended by the technique, the ‘cul-de-sac’ road layout system is efficient, economical and hygienic. For residential zones the ‘garden city’ road layouts are recommended. The obsolete and colonial use of confining walls must be kept to a minimum (Continentino, 1937, p.324). More than a town planning solution to the materialization of the healthy ideal, often directed to the inhabited center, the garden city model would become, in the engineer’s conception, adaptable also to spaces considered anti-hygienic and “harmful” to the urban population, such as the lazarettos. Particularly, the adoption of this model in his project for the Santa Isabel Colony for the Leprous (1931-1932), close to Belo Horizonte, evidences a relevant concern by proposing an urban intervention that linked the application of the garden city set of ideas to the regeneration of the ill, as described by him:

In the residential zone, whether for the ill or for administrative personal, it is fitting to adopt the ‘garden city’-type road layout system (which has lawn strips and garden strips in the center or close to the sidewalks) or better yet in the neighborhood-type (Continentino, 1937, p.250).

In Continentino’s practice this example reinforces the existence of common aspects between the hygienist and sanitation principles and the specifics of the garden city concept for the Brazilian case. However, it is fitting to mention that, even though this peculiar relationship has been identified, several of his proposals were based on the lessons of whom he called “the greatest modern urban planners”, such as Thomaz Adams, Nolen, Unwin, Hubbard, Agache, Benoit-Levy, among them, and Brazilian town planners including Armando Godoy, Anhaia Melo, Prestes Maia and Washington Azevedo (Continentino, 1937). In the descriptive memorial of the Urban Plan for the Industrial City of Monlevade, 1934 (Figure 04), which according to him
obeyed the fundamental characteristics of a modern industrial garden city, he underlined the importance of the North-american garden cities as “beautiful, comfortable, cheerful, healthy and achieving completely the high goals set by their organizers” (Continentino, 1937, p.348). Lechtworth and Welwyn in England, and Radburn in the United States, he states, were also considered in the designing of this plan.

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The semantic shifts and the resultant reduction or expansion of the original meaning of a town planning proposal are also present on the transfer processes. In the case of the garden city it is undeniable, as recalled by Osborn in 1949, that the term became highly attractive, carrying a series of meanings that qualified the proposed new urban spaces, regardless of the quality of the urban design or any relation whether to the original proposals or to the garden city tradition that was developed throughout the twentieth century.

Beyond the undue appropriations of the garden city term – which nowadays it is possible to dub as property advertisement strategies that fashioned a split between the term and its theoretical and practical basis and resulted in undertakings of questionable urban quality all around the world (Watanabe, 1992) – it’s interesting to observe one of the most significant shifts in its trajectory of appropriations. Some of those appropriations emphasized the presence of the garden, or rather, the green areas in cities and, consequently, tied the meaning of garden city to a different pattern of urban settling. This new pattern was considered environmentally superior to the urban layout inherited from the colonial period or the chaotic urban layout, subject to the private property interests between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century in Brazil.5

Natal’s Master Plan (Figure 05) serves as a reference to discuss this theme. When the engineer Carmem Portinho6 was called to present the Plan on the IV Panamerican Congress of
Architecture, in June 1930 in the city of Rio de Janeiro, it was in her interest to underline the divisions that a modern city should have and that the Plan should be fulfilled. Among these divisions, was a new garden neighborhood, “in standards similar to the English” (Portinho, 1930, p.01). But, how similar? Although she had only presented the plan, and not elaborated it, her observations were mainly based on her previous theoretical references rather than on the Plan writings.

Similar because there would have been demographic control through the rigorous appliance of “modern zoning”, avoiding overcrowding; furthermore, a principle of self-management was outlined in which the inhabitants would be called to “speak about the management of the neighborhood, setting the quantity and placement of shops and warehouses” (Portinho, 1930, p.02). As in the laborer neighborhood proposed, also “transformed” into a garden neighborhood, the parcels would allow for the plantation and growing of private gardens or orchards.

It was sought to disseminate these new hygienic standards on the manner of inhabiting the house and residing in the city. Thus, making a garden city meant to sprawl the green. Not the exuberant green of the surrounding natural landscape, but the methodical and controlled disposition, based on the free distribution of saplings by the municipal garden center, of permeable green areas and shadowed areas along the urban and private spaces of each housing unit.

It is mainly with Palumbo, author of the Master Plan, that this rendering from garden city into garden neighborhood can be perceived. What would initially be a reduction of the concept, the “environmental imagery” of a garden neighborhood notion will, inversely, extrapolate the limits of isolated or disarticulated parts in the city to serve as reference to an urban reform as a whole.

With a degree in the École des Beaux-Arts of Paris in the 1910s, it is no coincidence that this notion of garden neighborhood or suburb as an element of the city’s structuring shows up in Palumbo’s justification for the Master Plan of Natal. While it is certain that the appropriation of the set of ideals in France was linked from the beginning to the notion of garden suburb, especially due to the publication of “Le Cité Jardin” (1905), by Benoît-Lévy, it was not limited to a scheme of urban design. Inversely, it strengthened the emphasis on cooperativism and on an urban and social approach, reinforcing the French tradition of local self-government and especially, the idea of Cité “understood as a community pattern and citizen matrix”, which was in the roots of development of the social welfare and town planning promotion schemes.
Having come to work in Brazil in the early 1920s, Palumbo was consolidated as an eclectic architect of solid academic formation, working in Rio de Janeiro, and after 1925 in the Northeast of the country, in the cities of Natal, João Pessoa and Recife. Natal’s Master Plan, his first known town planning work, combines the classicist tradition of a geometrical urban composition with the discourse based in references to the garden city. The elements of picturesque layout town planning, with sinuous streets adapted to the topography – which would be considered characteristic of the garden city type of design –, would only appear on his urban designs in the 1930s, such as the residential parceling for the Recreio dos Bandeirantes, in Rio de Janeiro city, or the worker garden neighborhood of Juiz de Fora.

In Natal, the possibility of accomplishing a garden city was thus in the creation of great parks, the building of a public garden system, the implantation of green streets, ample lawn areas and pleasing shading that allowed for urban life in a “tropical city” (Palumbo, 1929, p.01).

It is undeniable that architect Barry Parker’s practice in São Paulo city at the end of 1910s was the main transfer manner to diffuse the Garden City idea in Brazil. From this moment onwards this idea, mainly on its garden neighborhood version, consolidated itself as a parameter of quality to discuss the urban reform or expansion in the country. Whatever it may mean, the garden neighborhoods became both an urban design reference and a valorization icon to property market. Beyond this, Parker’s permanence in Brazil for almost two years leads to educate other professionals, as Macedo Vieira, who would continue a planning practice based on garden city’s references with huge resonance at the local cultural and technical arena.

However, the transfer process must be always confronted to “temporal structures” and to each place material possibilities, which are historically changeable (Salgueiro, 2001). The different means to constitute the town planning discipline especially in Brazil points to the distinct forms to appropriate and to interpret models and ideas, actions depending upon material conditions as well as professionals’ individual trajectories.

Thus, the three proposed analysis axis to this paper intended to outline and to distinguish some of the main manners to diffuse Garden City in Brazil. Manners that reveal the different sources in which the discussion on Garden City were founded. Continentino, for example, would read into the Garden City idea some efficient elements to propose a suitable urban space to the ideals of urban healthiness, as fostered by sanitationist town planners.

Whether Parker brought to Brazil the translation – to some, a “reduction” – from garden city to garden neighborhood, it was certainly not the only or the principal manner to diffuse that variant. The analysis of Palumbo’s Master Plan, for example, may suggest other ways to discuss this shift. Palumbo would invert this “equation”, elaborating and proposing a new design for the city rooted on the garden neighborhood environmental qualities.

English version: Hélio Farias e Aline Araújo
NOTES

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1 The Medical Geographies and Topographies, appeared in Europe on the eighteenth century and diffused throughout the world, consolidated as important instruments of analysis and observation of the urban space, based on the inter-relation between the natural environment, the built environment and the origins of a certain set of illnesses (Ferreira, Eduardo e Dantas, 2003).

2 Frederic J. Osborn, for example, signaled that Unwin was one of the first to comprehend Howardian idea, although he was responsible to spread a “pattern of the universal suburban development” (Osborn, 1949, p.10).

3 A City of Sao Paulo Improvements and Freehold Land Company Limited was a property and benefit company, created in London, in 1911. In São Paulo, the company received a large area of empty lands that represented 1/3 of the surfaces urbanized until then in the city. At the end of 1915, it hired Parker & Unwin officer to plan Jardim América. Andrade (1998) suggests that the indication of Unwin came from the architect Joseph Bouvard and, mainly, from the engineer Victor da Silva Freire that “had visited the garden city of Letchworth, as well as the suburb of Hampstead in England, in company of Mr. Gurd, ‘Managing Director’ of City in Brasil”. He emphasizes that in the beginning it is Parker who came to São Paulo –to assist the company – and consolidated himself as the author of new proposals to new residential areas as Pacaembu, Anhangabaú, Alto da Lapa, Bela Aliança and the reformulation of Jardim América.

4 Parker influenced São Paulo city’s administrative authorities, vindicating the modification of the municipal law that made it impossible for better using of the land and, thus, the implementation of his projects. At that moment, the orthogonal layout was the official pattern, with specific street and block widths and lengths, opposing his formulation of sinuous layout that followed the level curves of the land (Andrade, 1998).

5 Mumford (1998, pp.555-566), enthusiast of Howard’s proposal and ideas heritage, stated that the term Garden City contained a contradiction in itself, as the term emphasized an element – the garden in the city – that was not what distinguished the proposal. Instead of Garden City, the term Green Belt City would be more appropriated to the essence of Howard’s ideas.

6 Carmem Portinho graduated in Civil Engineering from Rio de Janeiro Polytechnic School, in 1929; she led an important rule in Brazilian feministic movement and, alongside her husband, the architect Affonso Eduardo Reidy, took part in the Brazilian modern architecture consolidation process between the 1930s and 1950s.
REFERENCES


