

A garden city future

By David Crossley

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Much of New Orleans is lost, but a bright kernel of history and culture remains, and it will thrive again. In time, there will be again be more than a million people there, and something new will get its energy from the historic core.

It is the ideas of cores we need to think about as we ponder the future of south Louisiana and Mississippi. We keep hearing stories about the French Quarter, the Garden District, the Wards, and so on. People remember things about these places; they have human value.

Fortunately, many of the centers are higher than much of the surrounding land, and they were only temporarily wet. The French Quarter seems to be okay, and in everybody's hearts, that's the part we really care about.

Centers were the key to the Garden City concept of Ebenezer Howard more than 100 years ago. There is something important in his ideas to think about today, not only in Louisiana and Mississippi, but in Houston as well.

Howard argued that human beings should live in both town and country, and described master-planned communities for 32,000 people, living and working and playing in a 1,000-acre city core surrounded by 5,000 acres of farms, pastures, and wilderness.

The cities would be relatively self-sufficient, with light industry around the edge between town and country. At the very center would be civic and cultural buildings surrounding a garden. This ring of buildings would be surrounded by a large, continuous Central Park, which would be ringed by buildings forming what Howard called the Crystal Palace – a covered mall with shops, hotels, and restaurants, with offices and residences overhead.

The outward side of this commercial district would front on a street of urban brownstones, a typical elegant London neighborhood. Beyond these would be houses on their own lots facing a majestic boulevard whose median was 100 feet wide, a linear park, where schools might also be.

Further out were more houses, and then the industrial district – boot shops, machinery shops, tailors, butchers, food processing plants, and so on. The edge of this district was surrounded by a rail line that connected it to the rest of the world. And beyond that was the rural countryside.

So everybody was within a block of two of a significant park or garden, and within about a half mile of rural countryside. Fresh food was grown year round (the Crystal Palace also contained the Winter Garden), the air was clear, the people were healthy, and all was right with the world.

When Garden City filled up, rather than expand into its countryside, a new city would be started, on a new 6,000-acre plot, along the same lines. Rail and roads would connect these centers, and over time great diversity among centers would evolve, as people chose

situations that were most to their liking. (Howard also envisioned a bigger center city on 12,000 acres with 58,000 people, in order to pull together the critical mass for large-scale, regional cultural institutions.)

Sixty-four of these self-contained cities could fit inside the City of Houston. At 32,000 people per city, that means we could get 2,048,000 inside our city limits – a little bit more than we actually have living here now. And we would be living in paradise, with most of the land rural or wild.

Sounds like an interesting idea for the Louisiana and Mississippi coast where enormous acreages have been flattened. Human habitat as tentative and basically temporary as most of what was destroyed is not cheap along any kind of significant timescale, and not really very useful either, unless you think that providing a lot of start-over jobs every 20 or 30 years is a good thing. In terms of human accomplishment and meaning of life, this kind of employment is essentially pointless.

We might be smart, too, to look at The Netherlands, to places like Amsterdam and many smaller cities that are essentially built on similar marshland prone to flooding and huge storms.

We might think about that here in Houston, as well, where we expect 3.5 million more people in the next decades. Three and a half million! More than twice as many as lived in the New Orleans region before Katrina. We have the task of building homes, jobs, schools, fire and police stations, water and sewer, roads and transit, and all the rest for two regions the size of New Orleans in the next 25 years or so.

Our current plan is to build about 11,000 new miles of roadway to accommodate this crowd, and at current density we'll have to take out of service 1,500 or so square miles of new land, two and a half times as much as the City of Houston occupies. There will be precious little greenspace left in all that land, and much of the greenspace we have inside the present metropolis will be gone.

But, just for the sake of argument, we and the folks in Louisiana and Mississippi could consider the notion of Garden Cities as models for all that growth. In Houston, it would take 94 of them for all the new people, and that would occupy about 880 square miles of new land, instead of 1,525. But even better, 83 percent of all that area would be rural or wild. We would hardly make a dent on the land. And if we put those centers in the highest places and built for water, the Garden Metropolis of Houston would be here for a very long time to come.

We know that living in either big city or suburb is not the first choice for the majority of Americans, 57 percent of whom once said if they could live anywhere it would be a farm or small town, with small town the clear winner. We see small cities becoming popular, and because there aren't enough of them they will become too popular, and not be small cities any more.

We need thousands of small cities that are well built and that recognize their natural background and environmental dynamics. We need to stay back from places that are most likely to fill up with water or slide into the sea, and protect the rest of the natural areas that provide the ability to survive in hard times and thrive in good times. The Big Picture is that we need to think small, and think in terms of many towns and centers, and then connect them with transit service.

With this concept we could achieve all the diversity of culture and lifestyle we really want, and find that we are trying to protect much smaller areas of human habitat against the coming vagaries of climate change and natural disaster.

Crossley is president of the Gulf Coast Institute, a nonprofit that provides independent research for Houston's tomorrow. For more on garden cities, go to gulfcoastinstitute.org