

Timescapes: to follow Ebenezer Howard or Ebenezer Scrooge?

Article

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Timescapes: to follow Ebenezer Howard or Ebenezer Scrooge



Dr Mark Dobson (left) and Prof. Gavin Parker are both based at the University of Reading. All views expressed are personal.



A Christmas Carol was written by Charles Dickens in 1843 to reflect his moral critique of Victorian England, where inequality had become stark and public impoverishment was common.¹ Around 55 years later, Ebenezer Howard's *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* was published as a vision not just for planning but also for people.² Both works reflect on the past and present, and in different ways envision the future. This reminds us that planning has its roots in social reform agendas aimed at improving living conditions for all, and such ideals helped form a basis for the Garden Cities Association, now the TCPA, which is celebrating its 125-year anniversary, and is still urging progressive futures.



A family in Bethnal Green, London, 1900, engaged in 'flower-making'
[Credit: Museum of London]

The planning profession's original concerns with improving public health, sanitation, housing and living conditions in urban areas has expanded widely to include a host of public interest considerations across landscape protection; amenity spaces; heritage; environmental management; transport; infrastructure, and so on. The more recent considerations of adaptation to climate change and overseeing policy for biodiversity net gain in England, represent the latest iterations of a progressive widening of the ambit of formal planning.^{3, 4} Whilst such widening and deepening of planning issues brings its own set of new challenges, such progress should be embraced.



Bird's Hill, Letchworth Garden City. Constructed 1905. Decent housing and enough land to support self-sufficiency in fresh food.

[Credit: Letchworth Garden City Corporation, 1983]

The complexity and politics of planning may be deemed wicked,⁵ but apparent intractability forms a core part of planning activity and practice in a democratic environment. What is less acceptable is the apparent disregard for the value and importance of planning in identifying ways through difficult issues and its role in delivering sustainable outcomes. Indeed, whilst planning is substantively about

coordinating activity in space and shaping good places, what is often missed in this understanding is that planning is also a temporal activity; it is both *about* time (past, present and future), but significantly that good planning also *takes* time.

The twist and emphasis we bring to this enduringly progressive agenda is a focus upon the role of time and timescapes in planning.^{6, 7} Despite the future increasingly 'invading the present',⁸ the ongoing political agenda of 'project speed' **seems set to be continued by the Labour government, a priority which** has served to squeeze time in practice, featuring widespread manipulation of time to plan as well as what is being planned for. The temporal dimensions of planning require more attention not least to ensure professional consideration and deliberation over complex matters.

Given this short provocation is written with time in mind, we have sketched three short future planning scenarios below.

Future 1 – *Where the planner takes time to think and act*

The planner has time to consider and research complex issues, and work with others to ensure that the merits and challenges are aired through wider participation and deliberation. There is limited pressure to make decisions as quickly as possible for growth. A long-term and strategic approach is fostered to consider the evolving challenges of meeting sustainable development. The public interest remains a cornerstone of professional practice.

Future 2 – *Where the planner is squeezed and time is equated with speed*

Politicians and developers / investors continue to attack planning as a source of 'delay' and assert its primary focus should be to deliver housing and growth as efficiently as possible. Here the planner does whatever they can just to meet the performance timescaping of the system and has little time for wider consideration of the future nor for including others. In this state there is little time available to consider alternatives to dominant commercial / financial objectives.

Future 3 - Where time has been annihilated (technological 'e-uchronia'⁹ and the end of human-centred planning)

Planners have been dispensed with and codification has reached its zenith, where decisions are programmed in largely by AI bots who feed through data based on set criteria. The future is no longer determined by humans through land-use plans and decision-making committees. Instead, an infinite number of complex calculations for shaping the future are made in seconds. Trust is placed in seemingly objective and omnipotent machines that model every possible action.

Given these very different future planning timescapes, we can return to the past to consider lessons for our present. In setting off what we might term the 'redemption arc', which moves us away from self-interest and greed, Scrooge's former and deceased business partner Marley, weighed down by the chains of his conscience, sees the error of his ways and warns Scrooge that *people* should be his business and caring for his fellow humans should be the priority. As the spectre of Victorian-era widespread social inequality manifests in contemporary Britain, with food banks, homelessness and poor-quality accommodation being normalised, we assert that the business of planning is for people. Time in and for planning should be reflected in this agenda. As the TCPA looks ahead to its 150th anniversary, one measure of success is that, in the spirit of Howard, it continues to fight for proper time and resources to support planning for people and the planet and to forewarn those who seek to colonise the present and future for short-term gain.

Notes

¹ C Dickens: *A Christmas Carol*. Chapman & Hall, 1843

² E Howard: *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1898

³ G Parker, M Wargent, O Linovski, A Schoneboom, S Gunn, D Slade, ND Odeleye, C Maidment, E Shepherd, J Doak, T Elliot, N Nicholls, E Street, M Dobson, S Platts,

T Tasan-Kok: 'The Future of the Planning Profession'. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 2020, Vol. 21(3), 453-480, DOI: [10.1080/14649357.2020.1776014](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2020.1776014)

⁴ J Sturzaker, H Hickman: 'Planning's value, planners' values: defining and redefining for contemporary practice'. *Planning Practice & Research*, 2024, Vol. 39(2), 157-170, DOI: [10.1080/02697459.2024.2316988](https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2024.2316988)

⁵ In contemporary political language, 'wicked' problems are those that defy straightforward solutions, challenge conventional problem-solving approaches, and demand holistic thinking. They persistently resist easy fixes, urging policy makers and decision makers to embrace complexity and adaptability in their problem-solving endeavours. For an academic discussion of the concept and use of this term, see: J Lönngren, K van Poeck: 'Wicked problems: a mapping review of the literature'. *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology*, 2021, Vol. 28(6), 481-502, DOI: [10.1080/13504509.2020.1859415](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504509.2020.1859415)

⁶ G Parker, M Dobson: 'Planning in time, time for planning, and time to plan — 'timescaping' and its implications for practice'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2023, Vol. 92, Jul.-Aug., 243-247

⁷ M Dobson, G Parker: *Slow Planning? Timescapes, Power and Democracy*. Policy Press, 2024

⁸ A Toffler: *Future Shock*. Bantam, New York, 1970

⁹ We are playfully using e-uchronia here to demarcate between *euchronia* as a perfect or utopian state and *uchronia* as a hypothetical construction, i.e. where time is annihilated. The neologism of 'e-uchronia' expresses the technological element of both the euchronic and the uchronic.