

RENT: the 'centre of gravity' for a 'City of Liberated Labour'

ALAN SPENCE, a London community architect and planner, argues that the Russians should help the Germans to settle in new towns constructed on the philosophy of Britain's "garden cities".

Russian President Boris Yeltsin has promised to re-establish an autonomous district or republic for two million ethnic Germans, whose original Volga republic was dissolved by Stalin in 1941, after the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union.

Yeltsin has offered a former military exercise area alongside the river as the new homeland. The territorial concession is aimed at halting the influx of ethnic Germans into Germany, where they are guaranteed automatic citizenship.

But how will the Germans be settled in the new Volga republic? Bonn is prepared to put up the money: DM200m (£69m) has been earmarked to finance the resettlement.

✦

AN ACT OF INJUSTICE was inflicted on the Volga Germans by Stalin's infamous decision to expel them from their Volga Homeland in 1940 and disperse them throughout the Soviet Union. Some 200,000 of them should be allowed to build a Garden City on an underused site within the Saratov Region - their former homeland - in the Russian Federation.

Today, two million of them live scattered and fragmented lives. Hopes raised by sympathetic voices are collapsing as the Central Government fails to ideologically take on board the entrenched opposition of Saratov's rulers.

To counter this mood and to campaign for a solution, a group of Volga Germans set up the All-Union

Society of Germans (Revival). The central part of its programme is the establishment of an autonomous region within its former Volga homeland.

In spite of initial support from Boris Yeltsin, who said that "the Soviet German national problem shall be solved," the situation has not improved sufficiently to satisfy the mass of the Volga Germans and the increasing numbers of them returning to Germany. Revival leaders are beginning to advocate that all Soviet Germans should return to the re-united Germany of Chancellor Kohl.

Compounding the lethargy of the Russian Federal authority is the resistance of officialdom in the Saratov Region itself - and particularly from the area inhabited by the Volga Germans.

NEW REPUBLIC

These officials exaggerate the opposition of local Russians to the return of the Germans. Independent surveys by newspapers show that resentment does not correspond to what officials claim. And, in any case, opposition is founded on the mistaken belief that the Volga Germans want the full restoration of their former land, and that two million will be involved in the process.

This, in fact, is not so. For Revival recognises the impracticability of relocating such a huge number in one area. Heinrich Grout, the President of the organisation, told me that "just 200,000 re-settlers would be enough. Soviet Germans need a



republic both as a token of their equality and as a centre to promote their development."

We met in the Volgograd Region, the nearest point to his father's former village which lies 50 miles away, and where he has been able to settle after leaving North Kazakstan. Our meeting provoked in my mind a train of thought which may help to resolve the conflict of interests between Saratov people, local officials, Volga Germans, and the German Government - whose hands are already more than full to overflowing with refugees.

SEMYONOV

Another look should be taken at the city planning philosophy of the architect from Volgograd, or Stalin-grad as it was known when plans for its construction were developed in the late 1920s and 30s.

The architect was Vladimir Semyonov. He lived a long and noble life, most of which was spent in the pursuit of improving the architecture and its concomittant space arrangements (a neglected field in his early days when most architects were simply concerned with individual buildings) within a balanced, harmonious, and economically sound settlement pattern.

During his early years, Semyonov worked as an architect in England and experienced the building of Letchworth Garden City. The ideals which precipitated the garden city movement were part of the thinking of advanced architects and others

concerned with the appalling living conditions of workers crowded into the poisonous slums of early industrialism. Letchworth was based on the principles expressed by Ebenezer Howard in his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, written in 1903 and as valid today as it was then. I regard these principles as the answer to the deformation of cities, the plundering of nature and the unhappiness of most of mankind.

On his return to Moscow, Semyonov was able to persuade the Moscow/Kazan Railway Company (a company based on cooperative principles) to give him in 1912 the contract to build a new town for its workers at Prozorovka (Kratovo) - 40 kilometres to the SE of Moscow, and, furthermore, the right to construction Garden City layout principles.

That there is something of universal validity in Howard's proposals seems a legitimate deduction from the variety of national delegates who attended the first International Conference of the Garden City Association when it met in 1913 in London. Significantly, the Russian contingent formed the third largest group after the British and German, and, no doubt, this Russian interest was encouraged by the translation into Russian of Howard's book by Alexander Block in 1911.

The support of Germany for the Garden City idea manifested itself in a major way in the work done by post WWI German architects as they built to overcome the deprivations of industrialism and war through the welfare programmes initiated by the Weimar Republic. Hence the ready response from so many German architects when asked to participate in the city building programme of the new Soviet Union during the late 1920's and early 30's.

Semyonov, as noted earlier, was the architect/planner for the new tractor-building city of Stalingrad, and this he planned on Garden City principles. He kept firmly to the need to modify the concentric principles of Howard's model with the linear topography of the Volga river.

After this, Semyonov went on to become the chief architect for Moscow and the strategist of its 1925 Plan, which came to be defined as the 'model socialist city'. This model directly influenced the teams led by Patrick Abercrombie when they came to prepare the County of London and the Greater London Plans, to rebuild a blitzed London.

Unfortunately the Greater London Plan, like its stablemate the Moscow Plan, was never put into action. Hence the massive overcrowding in both capital cities and the spatial deformities of gigantic and unloved high-rise dwellings and office blocks.

The failure to keep the populations of Moscow and London within appropriate bounds has had the consequence that both cities have ballooned out, and, like all things extending beyond natural boundaries, they will burst. Paradoxically, though, in the case of the built environment, the explosion internalises itself into garrotting its citizens through pollution, congestion, and industrial sclerosis.

My belief is that if the settlement pattern established at Prozorovka by Semyonov had been emulated by British and Soviet planners, the trauma gripping both cities would have been avoided, and the Soviet Union - because of its different economic structure - would have been well advanced in its construction of a socialist civilization, or, as Vladimir Semyonov would have it, as 'Garden City - City of Liberated Labour'. A far cry indeed this is from a city such as Novokuznetsk where conditions of life and labour are such that a male life expectancy of 58 years puts it on a par with Victorian England.

LETCHWORTH

Where Semyonov failed, and this failure implies no criticism of him, was the inability to put into practice the economic and democratic basis of Howard's principles. He, in commenting on *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, said: "The centre of gravity of the whole project is in the figures and

data given, in the calculations showing its practical reality, even its profitability."

When Semyonov wrote this in 1912, it was still a hypothesis. It still awaited the proof of practice, though to him and other supporters it stood up to the test of the strands of empirical evidence then available. Today, however, we have the proof now available through a study of Letchworth Garden City which, from its inception in 1903, has been able to weather many vicissitudes. Today its prosperity is clear for all to see. Town ownership of the land on which it is built, with local determination of its use, leads to a dynamic initiative in the employment of community assets. Profitably running its own science park, farms, commercial premises, housing and leasing land for other uses adds to the wealth of the whole town and the welfare and prosperity of its 30,000 inhabitants.

FINANCED BY RENT

This insight into the economic strength of Howard's scheme encouraged Semyonov to propose, in 1922, a new settlement near Moscow. As at Letchworth, Semyonov would have formed a joint-stock company to build it. To pay the dividend on the shareholding (I suppose this would be fixed at 5% per annum, as Howard's was at Letchworth), and until ground rents were generated from leases, timber from the property would be sold.

"The centre of gravity" to which Semyonov attached so much importance, was derived from ground rent. This is the economic basis of the Garden City concept. Land is not sold but leased. Each user of land - whether for residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural use and irrespective of whether the user is a private individual or a local or national state authority - pays a market rent for the ground. The community receives back what society has or is investing in the soil.

Land is the common inheritance of people, but its value improves



VLADIMIR SEMYONOV

through constant social investment. Individual families congregate for a common purpose - say a group of settlers moving into thinly populated and underdeveloped territory. With the application of labour the area becomes more prosperous and begins to attract more settlers and commercial interests. These latter serve some common village interest, say a bakery or mechanics shop, and, at a more advanced stage, a large industrial cooperative believes there is a large enough market to warrant its location there. So it obtains planning permission from the villagers and builds its factory. Clearly, it is the sum total of people within the area which provides the need for the individual business to site its building on land within the community.

The individual farmer or industrial cooperative receives its reward from its 'profit or enterprise', i.e. having paid by bidding at auction a fair market rent for that use of land. Products are produced, be they agricultural or industrial, and become commodities for sale. Their quality in normal circumstances determines their price. And this price measures whether 'enterprise' is high, average or low. Thus, both community and

individual citizens - either as self-employed or as workers in a cooperative - receive or pay a just price for the use of land.

In Britain such individuals or privately owned companies purchase land from the existing landowner or obtain a lease for 10, 15 or 20 years from a freeholder, the person who owns the land outright. Some families have owned the land for 1,000 years, and through leasing they own the land in perpetuity. After the lease expires, the land is returned to the freeholder - including all the buildings on that piece of land.

The Duke of Westminster, for example, leased in 1885 a site in central London to a charitable organisation for it to build a hospital for the poor. This lease was for 100 years and, therefore, expired in 1985, so, the present Duke claimed it back. In spite of the fact that all hospitals became the property of the National Health Service when it was formed in 1948, the Duke received the hospital as well. He then sold on the emptied hospital to a developer for £10m, rented him a lease for another 100 years, and will also collect an annual ground rent from the hotel. Little wonder that such a system makes

GARDEN CITIES

English aristocrats rich - the present Duke of Westminster, for example, is said to be 'worth' £4,000m.

KNOWLEDGE of this system of land tenure was, of course, well-known to Semyonov and his contemporaries, for it was the daily stock-in-trade of Czarist land economics, and, more generally, capitalist land economics. Translating this knowledge into the structure of Garden Cities and devising a mechanism whereby the value of collective social investment could be returned to a municipal treasury for re-investment in the infrastructure and general welfare was the invention of Ebenezer Howard. In this he was profoundly influenced by the American land reformer, Henry George, one of whose most earnest advocates was Leo Tolstoy. These two both suggested that land be priced through competition for its use, either by tender or by auction.

This process of collecting rent for community use is no different when dealing with agricultural land. The latter is good or bad, or suitable for this or that purpose, and in England, commercial valuers determine with great accuracy the price of land simply by noting the results of sales and auctions. There was a sound basis to Semyonov's view that land economics was grounded on an empirical foundation.

RUSSIAN FEATURES

However, in my view, it was the way Semyonov modified the Garden City form, and used Russia's indigenous materials for construction, that brought him his greatest success. He wrote:

'We cannot copy any one ready-made model... Too different are we in both natural conditions and in character to repeat European examples without modification. We must work out a Russian type of town, answering to our severe climate and the spaciousness of the land and our national resources.'

Still, no matter how large or small a settlement is, or wherever it is situ-

ated geographically, a universal requirement is for there to be a 'central place' which locates all the buildings and facilities a community needs to service the community.

At Prozorovka, Semyonov followed this generalisation and clustered in the centre the theatre, library, etc. He broke the Russian tradition, however, by building some of his public buildings - the hospital, for example - in wood, the same material used for his house building. Later, during the 1920s, others such as Vladimir Tatlin, Peter Miturich, Nikolai Markovnikov and the Derfak school - a study of which offers boundless lessons for today's environmental and human settlement problems - advocated the same.

Semyonov's houses were carefully costed, in different unit sizes, and designed to be self-built by industrious workers and agriculturists.

Prozorovka, however, was not an all-round Garden City with its own economic base, but a residential settlement for workers on the Moscow/Kazan railway. In this respect it did not achieve Howard's definition:

'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.'

To help clarify his concept, Howard showed three diagrams. The first illustrated neighbourhoods of some 5,000 people, six of which went into the making of his city. The city itself would be of 30,000, six of which surrounded a larger city of 60,000; the whole constellation with its Central City making a Social City of 250,000 people. Howard time and again said that his diagrams were models meant to explain the principles. Application would be determined by topography, etc. To translate these principles into a Master Plan for a site in the Saratov Region suitable for building a Garden City for the Volga Germans is, basically, a technical job.

We should learn from history, however, and one lesson is the need

to avoid hardships suffered by building workers and their families during the early phase of construction, when in the past these families have been expected to live in barrack-blocks.

To dramatically reduce this period of hardship, and after an outline Master Plan has been prepared, a neighbourhood can be selected and built as a complete unit - with shops, schools, hospital, theatre, etc. This becomes the village for the people and their families involved in the further phases of construction.

SELF BUILD

Semyonov designed houses for self-building - a long tradition in Russian history, as this quote from El Lissitzky shows:

'The dwellings of the City of Moscow are built of wood... the roofs are covered with wood shingles ... hence, the great conflagrations.... Outside the city walls one can find on display in a special market a number of houses ready for assembly. They are available at reasonable cost and can be easily assembled on any other building site. The above described house market is located in a certain district of the city... the purchased house can be delivered within two days ready for assembly in any other district of the city. The timber framework has been pre-cut and matched and it remains only to fill the crevices with moss...' —A. Olearius (1636), *Journey to Moscovium*.

In my view self-build is necessary not only in the Soviet Union but universally, to enable mankind to overcome many social and environmental problems. Another look at Semyonov's houses will provide extremely useful information. Of course, modern technology has added much to self-build housing - though the number of ill-fated forays into such activity suggests a cautious approach. However, one that seems well tested and proved in Britain was developed by the Swiss/German architect Walter Segal.

Segal came to Britain in the 1930s,

and remained until his death in 1983. During this time he worked intensively on this idea of self-build housing from readily available components. During the past score years those built to his specifications have weathered well. His model is so well appreciated that it is becoming something of a yardstick in self-build housing projects and, therefore, could be looked at carefully to see if it is suitable for a Volga German Garden City.

RESOLVING DISPUTES

We return now to the plight of the Volga Germans. It seems clear that the Garden City idea could make a starting point for discussions between Saratov citizens and those Volga Germans who want to return to their homeland, to which, incidentally, they were originally invited by Catherine the Great two centuries ago.

A Garden City of 200,000 people (Revival's figure) would occupy much less than a 100th of the size of their former republic. A careful survey of the Saratov Region would identify an area of the appropriate size which is thinly populated. With proper explanations to the existing inhabitants - including the substantial benefits they would gain by living in a garden city - I believe the Volga Germans would be welcomed by the Volga Russians.

Of enormous importance in helping to resolve disputes would be the substantial finances available from Germany for resettlement. If this could be arranged, then the initial problem of any Garden City proposal - early finances - is resolved. And with support from Saratov's people, the Russian Federation, and the Soviet Parliament, this sad but still running sore - the displacement of the Volga Germans from their homes - would become a thing of the past.

This solution would be a model for other ethnic minorities who seek their own place in the sun. Nonetheless, it would be wise to heed the words of Semyonov, who wrote:

"Never forget 'politics' for it is precisely here that the centre of the question lies."