Utopian Designs:

The Owenite Communities

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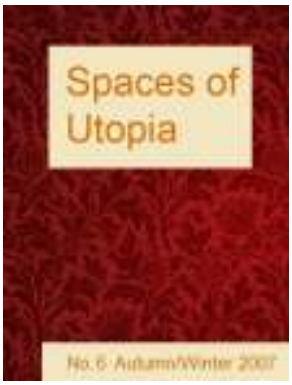

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There is an inherent fascination for utopians in imagined communities, those might-have-been from history, more so if they came near reality.[1] Such were a number of communities proposed and in several cases built by Robert Owen and his followers during the early nineteenth century.[2] Taking the factory community of New Lanark as his model, Owen, seeking to solve the post-Napoleonic war crisis in Britain and other parts of Europe, was by 1817 proposing planned communities whose inhabitants would find refuge from prevailing poverty and unemployment.[3]

In this paper we examine the development of the designs of Owenite communities beginning by addressing the question of how far New Lanark could be regarded as a proto-type. Secondly, we look at how Owen's ideas developed and how the Village Plans came about. Since both were linked closely to social regeneration a third concern is the influence of Owen's most significant socio-economic statement, the *Report to the County of Lanark,* and the subsequent proposals for what became known as the Motherwell Scheme, a community project near Glasgow. Fourthly, we find significant links in design (and personnel) to the Orbiston Community, the only *ab initio* community of its

period. Fifth, as Owen's proposals became more refined he recruited a young architect, Stedman Whitwell, who by 1824-25 was producing designs reflecting the grandiose ambitions of his patron for New Harmony. Finally, we review subsequent developments in Owenite communities reflecting on whether or not New Lanark was an appropriate model after all.

New Lanark – the Model?

Despite the rapid spread of industrialization and the development in Britain and other countries of new communities to house workers, few were on the scale of New Lanark. Established in 1785 by David Dale, a prominent Scottish industrialist, it quickly absorbed a population of over 2,000, the majority employed in the adjacent cotton mills. Dale proved to be a model employer and New Lanark, built in the classical, if functional, architecture of the period, attracted considerable interest nationally and internationally. Beyond employment, the Dale regime provided housing, education and welfare, not uniquely for factory communities, but of a high order by contemporary standards. There was also a strong sense of community, perhaps even citizenship, fostered by strong discipline, religion and education. How far the last, education, was at the core of Dale's community is hard to determine, but there can be little doubt it played a role even before Owen made it a central component of his plans for New Lanark. All of this was well known and Dale's community was visited and inspected by many enlightened elites and reformers. Owen's reforms after his arrival at New Lanark in 1800 are well enough known and need not detain us overmuch here, though the community initiatives, as

opposed to those in the workplace, are significant relative to future community provision.

Housing was improved and extended to accommodate a growing population. There were also a number of environmental initiatives, mainly related to health and hygiene: better water supply, street cleaning, waste, illegal sale of liquor and closure of retail outlets selling inferior or adulterated provisions at inflated prices. In this connection he established a community store to supply quality goods at fair prices, the profits being diverted to education. Improved education was certainly a key objective, dating from his early management of the community: the "Institute for the Formation of Character", as he named it, was built in the centre of the village and finally completed in 1816. Another new building, originally conceived as a community kitchen and dining room, extended the education facilities by providing a school and other communal facilities.

In layout and design New Lanark, though lacking the symmetry of numerous grid-planned villages built throughout Britain and Ireland during the age of "improvement", had much to commend it. The valley of the Clyde where the community nestled was an awkward site, but clever use was made of the location by wide streets which set the buildings far enough apart to allow maximum sunlight to reach the lower floors even in the northern winter. While resort was made to traditional Scottish tenement style, the worker's housing was in classical if functional style, also evident in the factory buildings.[4]

Was the design and architecture of New Lanark a template for early designs? Looking at the perspective of communities drawn up to accompany Owen's early propaganda, it seems highly likely that an anonymous artist had

access not only to Owen's proposals but also to images of New Lanark dating from Dale's regime, which were by then widely known from travelogues and other publications. It is possible that John Winning, who produced a series of prints for Owen showing the village and mills in their spectacular setting, was the artist.

We might also note that although New Lanark was primarily a factory village it was located in a rich agricultural area and consequently had its own farm which supplied the community. There is some evidence that factory children sometimes worked in the fields, especially at harvest time. Other interesting features of the village which emphasised this duality of urban-rural life were the allotments and gardens attached to many of the dwellings, duly noted by Owen as a means of aiding greater self-sufficiency.[5]

Owen's Village Plans

Even if Owen had only obliquely hinted at the village plan in the essays on *A New View of Society,* by the time these were in wider circulation and subsequently published in book form in 1816 his ideas about model communities were becoming more clearly defined. The original scheme of 1817 in *Relief for the Poor* suggested an optimum population of around 1,200 persons, half that of New Lanark at its peak. The plan drew quite specifically on arrangements at New Lanark and the key ideas about social organization set out in his essays. But unlike New Lanark the physical appearance of the proposed villages had a symmetry and style that more resembled military barracks built round squares located in plots of between 1.000 and 1.500 acres, which with careful husbandry would result in self-sufficiency. However, the new

communities might combine agriculture and industry, rather like planned villages of the period built where landowners had moved population from their estates or developed mines or industries. The population, according to Owen, would be educated and employed according to abilities and skills, and the scheme was to run at a potential profit once the capital cost of construction had been recovered, an arrangement that has its resonance today in public-private partnerships. While this sounded much like a workhouse, indeed resembling the later Dutch agricultural colonies, this was not Owen's intention.[6]

The major influences, apart from Owen's personal knowledge of factory or agricultural villages, were diverse. From his reading, and perhaps prompted by Francis Place, Owen learned of the seventeenth-century utopian, John Bellers, whose "Colleges of Industry" must have appealed because of their proposed linkage of education and industry, in the wider sense. On a European tour in 1818 he visited Hofwyl, the school run by Fellenberg, devoted to the education of rich and poor children, both cohorts being taught agriculture and crafts. Thanks to his travels and the numerous visitors to New Lanark he became increasingly familiar with the work of other enlightened reformers, such as Rumford, and almost certainly knew of the work of the Dutch Society of Benevolence which later promoted villages for the poor. By this time he may well have been in touch with some of the religious communities established in the United States, including those of the Harmonists in Ohio and then Indiana.[7]

By this time a much more millennial tone was already evidenced in his propaganda with the communities proposed by the plan transformed into "Villages of Unity and Mutual Co-operation". Competition was to be replaced by co-operation. However, he was careful to emphasise that equality could not

immediately prevail and that social class (in four divisions), sectarian or religious affiliation and appropriate skills would be important criteria in the selection of personnel. He even appended a complex table showing all possible combinations of religious sects and political parties to which future communitarians might conceivably adhere.

It seems likely that the earliest visualisations of the model community, mentioned above, date from this period, but they were soon enhanced to show a series of communities, all identical rectangles, stretching to the horizon. Three sides of the square were lodgings, the fourth being dormitories for all children over three years of age, notably in families with more than two children (was this one of his pleas for family limitation as a solution to the poverty problem?). The central building was to house a public kitchen and dining rooms, one on its right the infant school, lecture room and a place of worship, and a symmetrical lock to the left, a school for older children, library and meeting rooms (all reminiscent of New Lanark). Apartments would be provided for the superintendents, clergyman, schoolmaster, and surgeon, as well as for visitors. Owen allowed for a store and a range of buildings for craft and simple manufacturing, such as milling and brewing (as at New Harmony). Beyond the gardens attached to the community stretched the farmland, with hedge rows dedicated to fruit trees. The subsistence and environmental messages were strong.

And while there were later refinements, the original concept was enhanced rather than radically altered. Owen stuck to the plan with the same determination that characterised his social policy, regardless of context.

Report to Lanark and the Motherwell Scheme

Owen took the community scheme further through a major investigation of the post-war economic and social crises carried out in 1820-21 on behalf of the elites in the county of Lanark. There the landed and merchant classes felt threatened by disorder, but apparently this had not reached the gates of New Lanark. Owen's solution was a trial of his community near what is now Motherwell on the estate of Archibald James Hamilton of Dalzell, a local landowner who had embraced Owenism. The Motherwell scheme was important since it represented Owen's first attempt to translate the ideas of the plan into reality in a specific context and location. In his report he pointed out the importance replicating the New Lanark experience in the new community thus helping to solve the problems of unemployment and poverty which were then overwhelming the authorities. And again he repeated the universality of his proposal, which thus took on national rather than local significance.[8]

At this juncture a number of potential supporters presented themselves, some promising capital, others offering to direct operations either with Owen or on his behalf. Joining Hamilton was a prosperous Edinburgh businessman, Abram Combe, another convert to Owenism and brother of George Combe, the celebrated phrenologist who pronounced Owen's "bump of benevolence" the largest he had ever seen.

At the same time, as plans for Motherwell were being explored, Owen, prompted by Irish landed elites and clergy (who visited New Lanark in some numbers) tried to promote his community scheme in Ireland, which he visited in 1822-23.

Inspecting the poverty and near-starvation in some parts of the country, he was asked for his remedies, suggesting an experiment with one of his villages. At public meetings in Dublin and elsewhere Owen was able to display, by means of large visual aids, possibly prepared by Winning or Whitwell, views of both New Lanark and the proposed community, presumably Motherwell. Again New Lanark was represented as a model community where moral order prevailed and education and welfare underpinned a humanitarian workplace regime.

In a repeat of his experience in England, there was plenty of enthusiasm, but the financial backers, in the end, proved elusive. Meantime back in Scotland, and despite Owen's withdrawal to New Harmony in autumn 1824, a modified version of the Motherwell scheme promoted by Hamilton and Combe went ahead at Orbiston, about 15 kilometres south of Glasgow.

Orbiston Community

Given the enormous amount of attention Owen had given to the design and arrangement of his proposed communities, there was plenty of information from the *Report to Lanark* and subsequent proposals on which Hamilton and Combe could draw. Orbiston was therefore built to earlier plans though with modifications. The main building resembled the design advocated earlier in *Relief for the Poor* and the *Report to Lanark.* A classically styled central block (somewhat akin to both the Institute and Mill No. 3 at New Lanark) was to be four storeys high and be intended for community use. It would house the kitchens, dining rooms (to accommodate up to 800 persons), drawing rooms, ball room, lecture hall and library. The vast symmetrical L-shaped wings on either side were to provide private living quarters for the communitarians, with

special accommodation for the children. As at New Harmony, separate dormitories would house young unmarried males and females.

The first phase consisted of the north wing which Owen is thought to have inspected during a flying visit from the United States in summer 1825. By the autumn enough had been completed to accommodate the workmen and for a meeting of the shareholders (or "proprietors") to be held in the newly completed apartments. Here it was decided on financial grounds to complete the wing, postpone the central block, and instead build workshops nearby. Nevertheless the partly completed Orbiston did in effect closely resemble the design Owen had originally proposed, although the maximum population only reached 300 (much smaller than either New Lanark or New Harmony) of which 130 were children. The communitarians were divided into three main groups (though theoretically under the New System there should have been no divisions), the management (or "proprietors"), the specialists (an elite group of artisans, teachers, printers, etc) and the ordinary members. The last consisted mainly of workers who had fallen victim to the on-going slump following the end of the wars, particularly a group of hand-loom weavers, casualties of mechanisation. As in the original scheme the poor and unemployed were being assisted much as Owen intended. Among the educationists were Catherine Whitwell, and, for a time, Joseph Applegarth, another Owenite teacher, who later participated in the New Harmony community.

Economic foundations, in common with the majority of the Owenite communities, were shaky, though as the design suggests, considerable thought had been given to the social and educational aspects of life. Several interesting descriptions survive of the community and its facilities including those for

education, presided over by Catherine Whitwell. Her brother, as it happens, almost certainly inspected the community for himself.

Stedman Whitwell and his Designs

Now is the time to introduce another of the many Owenites attracted to communities, a young architect, Stedman Whitwell (1784-1840), whom Owen probably met in London or Birmingham.[9] Whitwell's sister, Catherine, who was also artistic, became a teacher at New Lanark, producing many of the famous visual aids used in the school, later moving, as we noted, to Orbiston. He attended lectures given by the great art collector, Sir John Soane, and offered to prepare illustrations for them, but was evidently rejected. Whitwell was employed on a number of public works, including the London docks, later undertaking several schemes of public architecture in Coventry, and at Leamington Spa made a proposal for a suburban community to be called "Southville", which never left the drawing board.

It is unclear when Whitwell actually coincided with Owen, though it may have been around the time of Owen's Irish tour. Whitwell does not seem to have visited New Lanark till October 1824, not long after Owen's departure for the United States. Nor do we know whether or not he produced his design independently of earlier plans (although it seems unlikely) or if he volunteered to help Owen or was commissioned to do so. Indeed it is possible that without having been there until 1825-26 Whitwell was designing for New Harmony, so as far as that context was concerned imagination must have been more significant than knowing the ground. Moreover there seem to have been several versions of Whitwell's drawing, some showing more detailed ornamentation and

vegetation than others, for example, the print circulated in the United States showed an agricultural community appropriate to a setting on the American frontier.

The design was altogether more grandiose than earlier, but suggested many original features and as before there was a strong emphasis on community and educational provision. Whitwell's drawing was accompanied by an enumerated key to all the facilities, which included thoughtful attention to heating and ventilation which he may have discerned at New Lanark.

Whitwell's drawings provided the template for the famous architectural model commissioned in 1825. 1,800mm square it showed the proposed community raised from the prairie on a platform (as in the drawings). Family houses under peaked roofs surrounded the square, while dining halls and other communal facilities extended toward a huge central greenhouse. The corner buildings were to be schools and "conversation rooms" for adult communitarians. One of Owen's more imaginative ideas, borrowed from New Lanark, was extending bunks from walls at night and tables on pulleys that could be raised to free space. The physical environment around the community was to be appreciated, as industry (not represented on the model) would be at a distance. This arrangement is suggestive of present day ecovillages where some participants work in the community itself while others have occupations in the economy beyond.

The model appears to have been a remarkable construction, made ready in time for Owen to use it at a lecture in London in September 1825, after which it was shipped across the Atlantic to be shown to President John Quincy Adams and then put on public display in Washington (and probably in New York and

Philadelphia). It was large enough to show the various buildings and their relative dimensions, presenting in miniature the Whitwell-Owen vision of an ideal community.

Whitwell later prepared a detailed description of his model, explaining the design of the buildings and the range of facilities they were intended to provide.[10] Remarkably a piece of Whitwell's model has survived, now displayed in the Owen House at New Lanark.

Subsequent Developments

The abandonment of the grand design for New Harmony was by no means the end of the story. However, none of the later communities, so far as we know, re-visited the earlier designs, possibly because the socio-economic context had changed. Yet there was still a characteristically strong emphasis on land and agriculture, seen in both the Irish venture at Ralahine and that of Queenwood, England, the most durable of the Owenite experiments.[11] Around the same time the Chartists, whose aims were essentially political reform, developed a land settlement scheme, though of individual units rather than the communal arrangements promoted by the Owenites.[12] There were, of course, significant links to contemporary European and American developments, particularly the Saint-Simonians in France, though their imagined communities rarely became realities. In the United States the New Harmony legacy was more enduring, being echoed in a communitarian movement throughout the rest of the nineteenth century that was often religiously inspired.[13]

Owen later restated much of this in *Home Colonies* (1841), partly a rejoinder to the emigration movement, where he returned to a familiar design

still essentially based on Whitwell's concept of 1825.[14] For Owen these and other schemes were always closely modelled on New Lanark. Yet, in many ways, it was an inappropriate model, a capitalist enterprise, philanthropic to a degree certainly, but where the profit motive, rather than community or co-operation was always paramount. And in contrast to industry from which he had accumulated the wealth that allowed him to promote his ideas, they seem in general to have represented a return to some sort of utopian rural idyll, personally experienced in his youth and in the community by the river Clyde at New Lanark.

Owen always regarded his community projects as experiments and as such could never be described, as they were by his detractors, as failures. In the ever-optimistic view of Owen and his followers the utopian design always remained a possibility.

Notes

[1] I am grateful to those who so kindly offered comments and suggestions on this paper at the 8th International Utopian Studies Conference, University of Plymouth, England, July 2007.

[2] For detailed histories of the Owenite communities in Britain, Ireland and the United States, see Claeys; Harrison; Garnet; and Royle.

[3] On the background to Owen's schemes, see Donnachie 2000 and 2005.

[4] On the building history and architecture of New Lanark, see Hume 1971.

[5] For a review of the history of the community under Dale and subsequently Owen's management, see Donnachie / Hewitt 1993.

[6] On the 1817 scheme, see Pollard / Salt 1977; Harrison 1969; and Donnachie for the background. Claeys 1993 reproduces the relevant pamphlets.

[7] On the influences, see Claeys 1993, vol 1; Harrison 1969; Donnachie. On the agricultural colonies in the Netherlands, see Robert Dale Owen's travel diary, edited by Elliott (1969).

[8] See Garnett 1972 and also Donnachie 1971, on the background to the Motherwell and Orbiston projects. Claeys 1993 and 2005 reproduce relevant pamphlets.

[9] Whitwell is the subject of an entry in Colvin 1995: 1046-1047.

[10] See Whitwell 1830. This is reproduced in part in the websites mentioned in the list of works cited.

[11] For Ralahine, see Garnett 1972 and also Geoghegan 1989 for a more recent account; on Queenwood, see Royle 1998.

[12] On Chartist activities, see Hatfield 2000.

[13] On New Harmony, see Harrison 1969 and also Donnachie 2000.

[14] Later developments are covered by Harrison 1969 and also Royle 1998. Claeys 1997 reproduces relevant contemporary material.

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