

NEWS FROM NOWHERE AND “GARDEN CITIES”:
MORRIS’S UTOPIA AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY
TOWN-DESIGN

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In the opening scene of *News from Nowhere* (first published serially in 1890-91), William Morris’s narrator describes a branch meeting of the Socialist League at which six speakers, four of them “Anarchists,” have debated fiercely “on the future of the fully-developed new society.” Riding home afterward in the “vapour bath” of a railway carriage, disheartened by interminable quarrels, Guest yearns to “see a day of it ... if I could but see it!”

Morris was not alone in his desire to “see it,” of course. His historically informed anarcho-socialist utopia reflected prior anarchist, anarcho-socialist, and municipal reformist ideals, including ideas about land use developed much earlier in the century in William Thompson’s *Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities* (1830) and varied in more recent works such as William Thomson’s *A Prospectus of Socialism* (1894), Peter Kropotkin’s *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* (1898, assembled from essays published in 1889-90), and Morris’s own *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (co-authored with Ernest Belfort Bax and serialized in 1886-87 as “Socialism from the Roots Up,” and revised for republication in 1893). Morris’s literary insights into the social and aesthetic implications of human living arrangements, in turn, anticipated and influenced Ebenezer Howard’s more gradualist views in *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898, revised as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, 1902), and through Howard’s work, many subsequent attempts to put cognate ideas into practice.

Many contemporary theorists recoiled from the gaping social wounds created by the unsafe and unlivable metropolises thrown up by the industrial revolution. Morris’s London, for example, newly engorged with almost six million inhabitants, was the largest city in Europe, and comparably brutal low wages and high rents, merciless overcrowding, and squalid sanitation inflicted great suffering and staggering rates of disease and mortality on the poor in Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham, and other citadels of the new capitalism. Much of the traffic that jammed these cities’ filthy, narrow streets conveyed food and other goods hauled