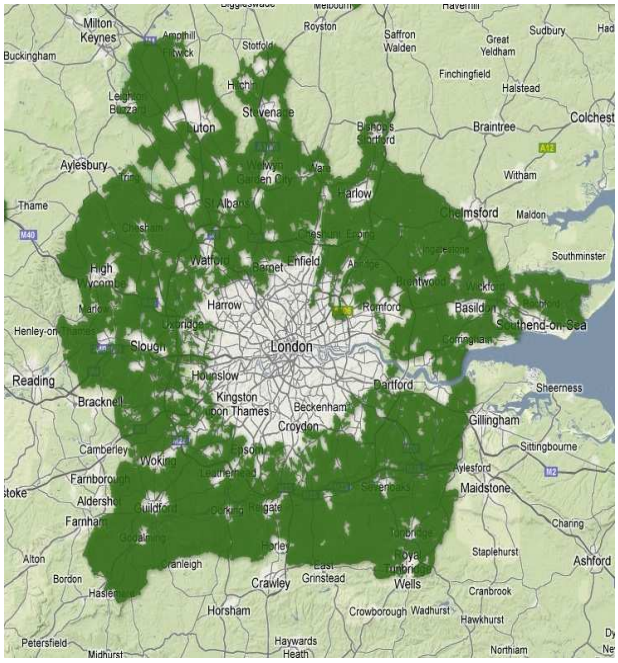
The Green Belt (pictured right) came into being as the result of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. Its total area was 110,000 hectares and its purpose was to stem the sprawl of London into the surrounding countryside. In 1986 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher opened the M25 Motorway, which girdles the green belt and upon leaving which motorists heading into London from Lincolnshire or the Isle or Wight drive through several miles of countryside before reaching the outer boroughs. Since its inception the Green Belt has been 'inviolate'. This sounds pleasant enough but only a year ago a national newspaper published a feature by a Housing and Planning Consultant who argued that London would very shortly run out of building space and the 'out of date' green belt is the culprit. The author did not propose an alternative; which is not to say that the Green Belt has ever been the inevitable or the only solution to a recognised problem.

In 2012 the London Society was delighted to be approached by a planning specialist who wished to consult the London Society Plan of 1918 as part of his research into an alternative proposal. The results of his researches are below.



GREEN WEDGES

by

Dr Fabiano Lemes de Oliveira

What if the capital today had a series of green wedges connecting the countryside directly to the central areas? What if the forces of history had led us to abandon the idea of a greenbelt in favour of green wedges? This is not as ludicrous a thought as one might imagine. In fact, there were numerous plans for London that favoured the creation of green wedges rather than a greenbelt.

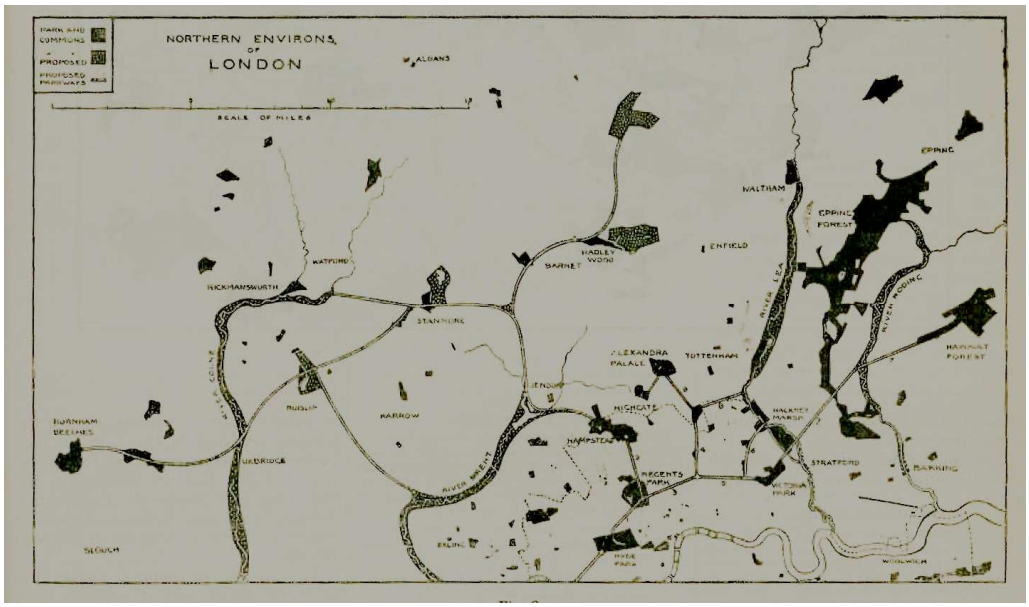
It is only at the turn of the 19th century that the concept of the greenbelt becomes a serious consideration in Britain. This was mainly due to Ebenezer Howard's publication *Tomorrow: a Peaceful Path for Real Reform* (1898), which kick-started the creation of garden cities and garden suburbs as alternatives to the congested metropolises and polluted industrial towns. Although the idea spread quickly as an instrument to control sprawl, to protect the countryside from development and to guarantee access to nature for urban dwellers, it was not unanimously accepted. In the first decade of the 20th century, alternative views were starting to emerge.

Henry Vaughan Lanchester radically criticised the general assumption about the efficacy of the greenbelt, preferring the placement of parks radially. Among other benefits this would provide a direct link between the inner urban areas and the countryside. He published an article in 1908 entitled *Park Systems for Great Cities*, in which he developed the idea and applied it to London. He put forward a park system plan for the capital including a green wedge in Epping Forest between the River Lea and the River Roding.

Even though the idea had already started to emerge, it would be with the RIBA International Town Planning Conference held in London in 1910 that the green wedge would be formally theorised and would acquire international significance.

At the Conference, the German engineer Rudolf Eberstadt presented his runner-up entry to the Greater Berlin Competition, which was held just some months before the RIBA event and which dealt with similar concerns. He argued that the natural pattern of town extension was radial and backboned by traffic lines. The green spaces therefore should follow the radial arteries and act as channels of greenery, sunlight and fresh air into the city. Their wedge form would maximise these flows and follow the logic that land on the outskirts was more accessible for local authorities to convert into parks.

In the critique of the 'octopus-like' nature of the expansion of modern towns, urban sprawl



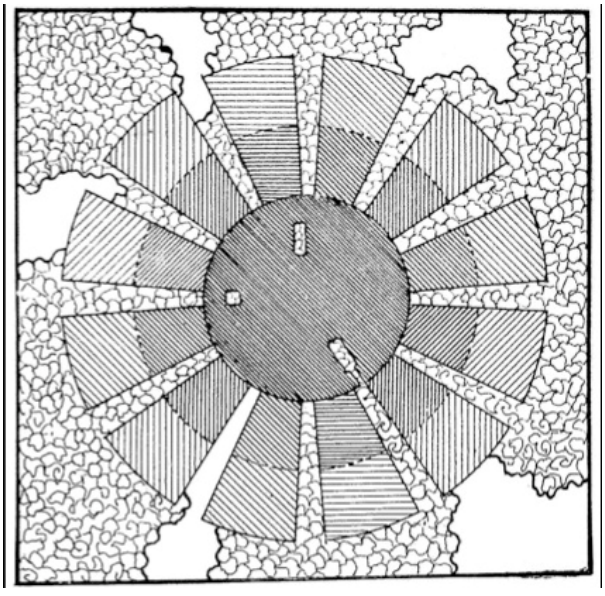
H V Lanchester's Park System Plan for London. 1908

was seen as a threat to the countryside. For Eberstadt, this form of expansion presented an opportunity for the creation of magnificent green wedges. Many fellow participants at the Conference referred to his idea in a sympathetic manner; they included Liverpool's City Engineer John Brodie, the landscape architect Thomas Mawson and H V Lanchester, who read a paper along similar lines depicting how the green wedges could be used in general zoning strategies. This idea was also further discussed in an informal session when Lanchester showed how it could be applied to north London and the south of the Thames, in line with his initial studies of 1908.

The RIBA Town Planning Conference and its Transactions played a fundamental role in propagating the idea across the world. The green wedge emerged as the best typology of green space to be linked to radial arteries and geographical features such as river valleys and areas of natural beauty left over by urban development. It was presented as the antithesis of the greenbelt, inasmuch as its main functions were to bring fresh air, sunlight and greenery into the city and to provide a direct link to the countryside in the middle of nature. Soon after the conference the idea was exciting the minds of professionals involved with the problems of town planning. Patrick Abercrombie, who would later be the author of the *County of London Plan 1943* and the *Greater London Plan 1944*, published a paper in 1912 titled *Town* ***Planning in Greater London: the Need for Cooperation,*** in which he argued for the implementation of green wedges in London. Hampstead Garden Suburb, Hampstead Heath, Parliament Hill and Regents Park would be just one of many that could be created.

After the RIBA Town Planning Conference – at which comprehensive plans for many large cities such as Chicago and Berlin were presented – it became clear that London was lagging behind and needed a plan of its own. In 1912, the London Society was founded and its members, among whom were many organisers of the RIBA Conference and important names in architecture and planning at the time, started working on a plan for the capital. The Society's *Development Plan* was finally presented in 1918.

The *Plan* focused primarily on the creation and improvement of radial roads and green spaces. From its inception, the Society had been concerned with the way in which London was expanding. This becomes evident in many of the Society's early publications, but in particular in



Rudolf Eberstadt's Diagram of Green Wedges

the Notes of their Aims: 'London is an immense octopus and its tentacles spread further afield, north, south, east and west'. Although seen as a negative phenomenon, this form of growth would, in principle, provide perfect opportunities for the development of green wedges.

Professor Lanchester, who worked on the *Development Plan*, capitalised on the opportunity. His defence of the idea clearly manifested itself in the way the park system plan was conceived, as it included practically the same vast green wedge in the Epping Forest as in the 1908 proposal and another one in northwest London, from Stanmore to the Brent Reservoir.

Although the inclusion of green wedges here is tentative, the *London Society Development Plan* certainly pushed forward the debates about their potential application and informed future proposals for the capital. It clearly showed the need of an articulated discourse encompassing traffic systems and park systems, in which green wedges emerged.

This idea would be further developed by many others in the interwar and post-war periods. Notable among the authors of the numerous plans for the implementation of green wedges across the capital were Raymond Unwin, Patrick Abercrombie and H V Lanchester himself. As the concept matured, it became clear that the green wedges did not need to exclude the greenbelt; the two could be combined.

In spite of the efforts of architects, engineers, landscape architects and planners in the first half of the 20th century, the task of implementing green wedges was a massive challenge. The problems arose from the combination of the difficulties in controlling development within urban areas coupled with the reaction of movements for the protection of the countryside, which saw the wedges as threats. The relative ease with which land could be secured for the creation of greenbelts after the 1938 Act also made the struggle to build green wedges even more difficult.

Greenbelts became popularised and came to dominate the debates over alternative typologies of green space on both city and regional levels. Internationally, the green wedge idea became famous with the *Copenhagen Finger Plan* of 1948 and is nowadays regaining momentum with plans for cities like Barcelona and Milan.

What if London had opted for green wedges instead of, or as well as, the greenbelt? Should we still consider them as viable planning elements? In fact, we just have! Look at the axis formed by the Olympic Park, the Lea Valley and Epping Forest.

In the end, Lanchester and the *London Society Plan* were not that far off.

London Society Plan, North London, 1918

Fabiano Lemes de Oliveira *gained his Doctorate in History and Theory of Architecture and Urbanism from the Technical University of Catalonia in Barcelona. He is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Architecture of the University of Portsmouth. One of his current research projects looks into the origins and development of the green wedge idea in the international planning debates in the 20th century. He has published widely on urban planning, urban design and history of architecture.*