

# Backgarden Worldbuilding

## The Architecture of the Model Village

Mike Aling

Fig\_01.jpeg

British model villages had their golden age as popular tourist destinations from the 1930s to the 1960s, and around 20 are still in existence today. The model village is a curious British invention and although each is unique, they share many traits: they are of similar sizes and scales (often 1:12 or thereabouts); have a range of similar building types, forms and programmes; and are invariably nostalgia machines that lament for times past. The term ‘model village’ here of course refers to a miniaturised settlement, rather than the other distinct use of the term describing idealised full-scale towns such as New Lanark in Central Scotland, Bournville in the English Midlands or Portmeirion in North Wales.

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Model villages are located in wonderfully banal types of outdoor sites including garden centres, the grounds of larger visitor attractions, and beach promenades, but gardens are by far the most common site. This might be the garden of a pub looking to attract additional trade, such as the model village at Bourton-on-the Water (1937) in the English Cotswolds, or the private garden of the model-village maker that opens itself to the public (Bekonscot (1929–) in Beaconsfield just to the west of London), or the garden of a disinterested landlord (the now-defunct model village at Ramsgate in Kent, England (1953–2003)).<sup>1</sup> While the practice of worldbuilding is mostly an indoor endeavour, where worlds are developed in the confines of offices, studies or bedrooms – perhaps now more than ever, during the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of writing – model villages have long imagined worlds in the context of the back-garden site.

### Model Villaging as Worldmodelling

Model villages can be determined as a separate typology to their close relation the *miniature city*.<sup>2</sup> A straightforward differentiation is that model villages are sited outdoors, whereas miniature cities are indoor enterprises with carefully controlled atmospheres. Also, often miniature cities are raised to near eye level, either on tables or through accentuated landscaping, whereas model villages are firmly sited on the ground.

The model village is sited in the not-quite real, or more often the never-was real in their particular form of toy-like simulacra. Sometimes, they are yet-to-be real, and share this condition with architectural models. Unlike the architectural model however, model villages are largely functionless: they are a pursuit of delight. They are also worldbuilding exercises, and like architectural models, their success lies in their immersive potential, along with the coherence of their spatial and cultural logic under their own terms of engagement. A cognitive displacement is made by the visitor, not only through scale shifting, but into the strangely familiar world beneath the knees, a supposedly brighter place if the visitor is

willing to agree that a more anodyne and apolitical village is an improvement on actuality. Through this the model village exudes a very British form of Magical Realist worldbuilding. This of course is not without its problems. Although shrouded in light-heartedness and a knowingly retrograde mindset, model villages emanate overly prescriptive idealisations of rural communities, steadfastly affirming quintessential English village-ness from the inter-war years of their early golden age. Although seen as a safely distant anachronism today, it must have seemed a disturbingly conservative ideology in the post-war period (its late golden age), given the tremendous social, political and civil changes of that time.

The garden is the worldspace of model villages. There is a curious sense of a diminutive picturesque at play in many model villages, one that actively necessitates the visitor to walk through its miniature urbanism as a core circulatory method. The gigantism felt has inspired numerous apt references to Lilliput in the history of model villages,<sup>3</sup> as we indeed become the ‘Quinbus Flestrin’ (‘Man Mountain’) of a 12:1 Lemuel Gulliver.<sup>4</sup> The use of the body as a measuring device offers an alluring strangeness, as Susan Stewart states in her book *On Longing* (1984): ‘The body is our mode of perceiving scale and, as the body of the other, becomes our antithetical mode of stating conventions of symmetry and balance on the one hand, and the grotesque and the disproportionate on the other.’<sup>5</sup> Our bodies are demonstrably the wrong scale, yet the willing suspension of disbelief allows us to enter its world. This close proximity of the visitor/occupant to the models allows for the admiration of the craft on display, and for the ‘finding’ of moments in the miniature community to project oneself into. These devices are ways that model villages invite us into their communities, through the lives of their occupants and their details, their rituals and events, forever frozen. At times we are offered glimpses into their closest secrets: interior spaces, highly cherished as model villages are almost entirely exterior experiences.

This close proximity affords us a way to understand how the model village can be seen as analogous to the contemporary digital architectural model: through offering the viewer an immersive and multi-scalar experience. Unlike pre-digital physical architectural models which were largely understood as externalised objects that encouraged a distance between the viewer and the architectural subject, this proximity allowed the model village to become a proto-digital model space, unlike the miniature city, kept at a careful distance from the viewer.

## **Origins of Unparalleled Fancy**

The first model village was the product of an architect’s imagination, begun in 1907 by architect Charles Paget Wade whilst living in and working on the Hampstead Garden Suburb in northwest London as a junior architect for Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker.<sup>6</sup> Named ‘Fladbury’, it was designed and painstakingly constructed by Wade in the rear garden of his lodgings at Temple Fortune Hill in Hampstead, for Betty, the daughter of his landlords.<sup>7</sup> Fittingly, Hampstead Garden Suburb is somewhat of a model village itself, in both senses of the term. Concepts around the Garden City Movement championed by Unwin at the time, along with Wade’s frustrations in his daily work, fed directly into his evening passion for worldbuilding through modelling.<sup>8</sup> Fladbury predates the Bekonscot model village by over 20 years. It is often misinterpreted as the earliest in the UK, whereas it is the oldest *surviving* model village.

[Fig\\_04.national trust.jpeg](#)

Amongst other obsessions, Wade was a historical costume enthusiast, and was often labelled an eccentric; however, as his biographer Jonathan Howard states, ‘the term “eccentric” can serve to belittle or dismiss Charles’ determination and achievements, and foreclose any effort to delve more deeply into his values and motivations’.<sup>9</sup> The sentiment in this quote can perhaps be seen as true of any model village, let alone its creator: their messages are often disregarded as folly. And it is true that Fladbury was essentially a toy. One must question who the toy is for, whether it is the children that benefit most from the visit to the village, or the parents. The inspiration for Fladbury, like many other model villages, was in the garden model railway sets gaining popularity for wealthy (mostly) men at the turn of the 20th century: these models offered the chance to construct a rural idyll and revive one’s childhood in the comfort of the garden. They continue today with colossal dimensions, as outlined by Mark JP Wolf earlier in this issue (see pp xx–xx). Initially, rural settlements were built sparsely along the track to conjure lengthy journeys, equating to a greater sense of remoteness from the everyday. Although buildings initially played a supporting role, these architectures eventually evolved into the splinter typology of our focus here.

[Fig\\_05.national trust.jpg](#)

Betty grew up, Wade moved on, and Fladbury was relocated, renamed and vastly expanded into ‘Wolf’s Cove’ in the grounds of Snowhill Manor in Gloucestershire. Wade purchased the Tudor manor house on his return from the First World War, and it became his life’s work as he restored and transformed the manor into a curated museum for his extensive collection of objects and artefacts. Wade gifted Snowhill to the National Trust towards the end of his life in the early 1950s and it can still be visited today, with reconstructed elements of Wolf’s Cove making seasonal appearances in the grounds, and original elements on display inside. In 1931 John Betjeman visited Wolf’s Cove and was so enamoured that he penned a half-joke, half-polemic homage to the model village as an article for the *Architectural Review*, of which he was editor at the time. Betjeman wrote of Wolf’s Cove as though it were a full-scale village, describing its everyday rural culture and speculating on the origins of its vernacular architectures.

[Fig\\_06.jpeg](#)

## **The Contemporary Model Village**

Model villages were a 20th-century invention, but their legacy remains etched on the cultural psyche. Most recently, artist James Cauty has been subverting the model village and its tropes in his *ADP (Aftermath Dislocation Principle)* (2013) trilogy of projects, a village distinctly in the dystopian register. Cauty imagines an urban stretch in Bedfordshire peppered with vigilante law, militia justice and breakouts of rioting, all modelled exquisitely at 1:87. Cauty’s newest and largest-scale model village, titled *ESTATE* (2020), is currently touring the UK in a shipping container, and takes the chaos and craft of the earlier work to new scales (1:24). Somewhat ironically for a model depicting scenes of destruction, ruin and disaster, it is an exquisite and lovingly made hyperrealist construction.

[Fig\\_09.jpeg](#)

In my own research I am developing a model village, titled ‘Groenwyeh for DLR’. A work in progress, it is sited on a roof garden in Greenwich, London, and – like all model villages – is both a register of its site context, and a chimera that amalgamates elements found in the canon of model villages. To enter Groenwyeh, and to offer a window into the ‘Digital Doppelvillage’ – Groenwyeh’s digital twin where the village’s interiors exist – a portable filming apparatus is used in the form of a walking cane that employs miniature cameras to produce a 3-dimensional image in a virtual-reality headset. The cameras adjust the user’s pupillary distance and overall height, in order for him or her to experience the space of the model stereoscopically and at a reduced scale. Findings suggest that as the body shrinks and the eyes get closer together, one’s perception of depth scales proportionally: a scaled architecture is always scaled to its user. The walking cane is a digital carving made from simulated Banyan vine found on the Island of St Kitts in the Caribbean, home to the late Charles Paget Wade and inspired by his cane collection. Its colourway is matched to ‘Wade Blue’ invented by Wade.

Fig\_07.jpeg

Fig\_10.jpeg

In keeping with tradition, Groenwyeh is organised around the parametrics of model railway ‘trackplans’ (in this instance the southeast London rail network), developed to the dimensions prescribed by railway gauges, including the niche and philosophically on-trend OOO gauge. Trackplanning is undertaken on specific hobbyist software, a model railway enthusiast’s equivalent to building information modelling (BIM), with necessary parts and gauges catered for. Groenwyeh also has its own model village nested within itself, an endless series of fractal villages in reference to those found in model villages such as ‘Godshill’ (1952–) on the Isle of Wight, England, and Bourton-on-the Water.

Fig\_08.jpeg

Groenwyeh is built up of models that reference its local real-world architectures. These architectures are curated from throughout the history of Greenwich and studied due to their model-like qualities and intentions, where clear-cut determinations of model and subject become blurred such as in ‘The Fame’, a full-scale model training (non-)boat moored at Greenwich in the 19th century. Examples of facsimile spaces are also explored, such as the polluted Victorian Greenwich Beach, historically without any discernible beach-like qualities. Local programmes from the area are also surveyed as models-as-exemplars or paragons, including the ideal architectures of Inigo Jones’s Queen’s House (1635) and Christopher Wren and Nicholas Hawksmoor’s Royal Hospital (1742). Spaces that embraced experiences of alterity are also posited – models-as-alterants – including the Palace of Varieties and the outrageous parties at Blackheath Pagoda.

Groenwyeh is a research project that both theorises and offers an immersive engagement with how model villages function as models beyond the act of miniaturisation. They are spaces of worldbuilding practice that have long afforded us an immersive, multisensory, multi-scalar and politically complex set of experiences, at times to monstrous proportions. This is something they share with today’s digital and virtual models. For such a retrograde and often backward-looking enterprise, model villages were strangely ahead of their time.

## Notes

1. Brian Salter, *Model Towns and Villages: In Britain ... In Public ... In All Weathers*, In House Publications (East Grinstead), 2014, p 22.
2. Tim Dunn, *Model Villages*, Amberley Publishing (Stroud), 2017, p 6.
3. *Ibid*, p 16.
4. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* [1726], The Folio Society (London), 1965, p 38.
5. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* [1984], Duke University Press (Durham, NC), 2007, p xii.
6. Paul Capewell, *Charles Paget Wade Before Snowhill: His Early Life and Work at Hampstead Garden Suburb*, On the Road Again (London), 2nd edn, 2019, p 29.
7. Jonathan Howard, *A Thousand Fancies: The Collection of Charles Wade of Snowhill Manor (The National Trust)*, The History Press (Stroud), 2016, p 44.
8. Capewell, *op cit*, p 47.
9. Howard, *op cit*, p 8.

## CAPTIONS

### Fig\_01.jpeg

#### **Mike Aling, Groenwych for DLR Model Village, Greenwich, London, 2020**

This village research project in development researches and speculates on how the Greenwich area can be explored as a 'model' space through different uses of the term. It also investigates the long and peculiar histories, eccentricities and tropes of the British model village form. The image shows the model of the Groenwych model village that will be sited in it. This fractal game of nested models has long been played in British model villages.

### Fig 03.ai

#### **Mike Aling, Extant model villages in the UK, 2020**

Plans of nine surviving British model villages, outlining their relative areas, circulation patterns, model railway tracks and water features.

### Fig\_02.jpeg

#### **Polperro Model Village, Cornwall, England, 2020**

Polperro Model Village (1948–) is scaled to 1:12, and like the model village at Bourton-on-the-Water, it is a miniature facsimile of the town it is sited in. Polperro tackles the original subject matter of the model village, initially explored in Charles Paget Wade's Wolf's Cove (a development of the first model village): the Cornish fishing village. The building models are mostly made from cement and are repaired annually out of peak season.

### Fig\_04.national trust.jpeg

#### **Fladbury Model Village in the garden of 9 Temple Fortune Hill, Hampstead Garden Suburb, London, c 1908**

Charles Paget Wade constructed the first known British model village, titled 'Fladbury', whilst lodging and working at the Hampstead Garden Suburb. The village was built as a present for Betty, the daughter of Wade's landlords at the time. Fladbury was later relocated and developed into the more ambitious 'Wolf's Cove' at Snowhill Manor in Gloucestershire, England.

[Fig\\_05.national trust.jpg](#)

**Charles Paget Wade at Snowhill Manor, Gloucestershire, England, early 1920s**

Charles Paget Wade, here photographed outside his home-museum Snowhill Manor in the early 1920s, dressed in Cromwellian-era military attire.

[Fig\\_06.jpeg](#)

**John Betjeman, ‘Wolf’s Cove, Thirlwall Mere, and District’, in *Architectural Review*, January 1932**

John Betjeman visited Charles Paget Wade at Snowhill Manor in 1931 and was so enamoured with the Wolf’s Cove model village that he wrote an article in the *Architectural Review* – of which he was then editor – imagining the model as a full-scale, inhabited village.

[Fig\\_09.jpeg](#)

**James Cauty, *ESTATE*, 2020**

The *ESTATE* project is a dystopian model village artwork currently touring the UK in a shipping container. Made up of four tower blocks, each with their own devastating programme (a live-work-die tower, a children’s prison, a care home for the dying, and a centre for neo-pagans), the project subverts the twee image of the model village and makes the subject matter even more monstrous in the process.

[Fig\\_07.jpeg](#)

**Mike Aling, *Variations on a Walking Cane*, Groenwyck for DLR Model Village, Greenwich, London, 2020**

The walking cane is a gateway into Groenwyck model village and its virtual-reality interiors. An inverted periscope, it shrinks the user’s perception – both height and pupillary distance – to the required scale (1:24 / 1:18 / 1:12 / 1:10 / 1:9), by way of stereoscopic miniature camera equipment at its base that connects to a virtual-reality headset. Its design draws on Charles Paget Wade’s cane collection and its colourway is based on the ‘Wade Blue’ he invented.

[Fig\\_10.jpeg](#)

**Mike Aling, Groenwyck for DLR Model Village, Greenwich, London, 2020**

Groenwyck operates at multiple scales, both in the physical and digital worlds. Its scales range from 1:160 through to 1:12. When scaled up to 1:1, in theory it is officially both the largest and smallest model village in the UK.

[Fig\\_08.jpeg](#)

**Model of the model village at Bourton-on-the-Water, in the model village at Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucestershire, England, 2019**

The ‘1:9th Wonder of the World’ and the only model village with Grade II listed status in the UK, the model village at Bourton-on-the-Water was constructed entirely from local Cotswold stone by craftsmen in the mid-1930s. It is sited near the centre of the 1:1 picturesque village, and in turn this image shows the 1:81 model of the Bourton model village, sited inside the model village. If one looks closely, an even smaller 1:729 model of the model village can be found within.