

Due: February 2

Describe what life was supposed to look like inside these villages. In the end, why didn't they work?

Robert Owen revolutionized mill operation by eliminating the typical evils of the British factory system and transforming New Lanark into a model workers' community, which was visited by writers, reformers, and skeptics. By raising wages, reducing hours of work, improving factory sanitation, rebuilding workers' homes, and providing schools for employees' children, he reversed the standard concept of labor relations. Having improved conditions through benevolence, Owen gained productivity and efficiency. With New Lanark as a laboratory to test his hypothesis, he proved that a capitalist's concern for workers is profitable.

Owen believed that humanity is no better than its environment. Since people are shaped by environment, improvement of that environment can produce a paradise on earth. Owen shocked business and government leaders by stating that the development of machine production, if organized entirely for profit, would inevitably lead to poverty and degradation for workers. His solution was cooperation. Envisioning Villages of Cooperation—planned communities where 800–1200 persons worked together and lived in private apartments—Owen insisted that kitchens, reading rooms, and sitting rooms be used in common. Young children would be boarded; older children would tend the gardens. The community would carry on a variety of occupations insuring self-sufficiency. At a distance from the commune would be the factory unit.

Naturally, with the concept of laissez faire in full vogue, few persons gave serious consideration to Owen's scheme. In spite of David Ricardo's willingness to test the plan, the idea lacked funds and support. Because he chose poor associates, Owen's scheme lacked sufficient practical planning. One associate defrauded him and set up a whiskey distillery, rival communities sprang up, and the end result was complete failure. Owen lost 80 percent of his fortune.