

## A fresh appraisal of the New Towns programme

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# a fresh appraisal of the new towns programme

**Britain's New Towns are little understood and often misrepresented, but they deserve greater attention as a major aspect of Britain's built form – and for the lessons they offer for today's attempts to make sustainable places where people will want to live and work, says **Anthony Alexander****

The history of the UK's post-war New Towns is closely tied to that of the TCPA. Frederic Osborn, Ebenezer Howard's leading disciple, was their chief promoter, fashioning their creation in the 1940s in partnership with the likes of Lord John Reith, Professor Patrick Abercrombie, the Minister for Town and Country Planning, Lewis Silkin, and others. My new book, *Britain's New Towns: Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities*,<sup>1</sup> offers a fresh appraisal of the New Towns programme, looking at their origins and legacy, and attempting to draw lessons for today.

topic for debate in urban theory and practice. I hope this book will help to rectify this situation by providing an accessible and comprehensive overview, well illustrated, with a particular focus on urban design and regeneration.

Throughout much of the second half of the 20th century the New Towns attracted the best available talent in the fields of architecture, urbanism and planning. Many modern architects, from Frederick Gibberd to Norman Foster, cut their teeth on the New Towns. Today, urban professionals, both young and old, should turn to the New Towns again: first,



**'How can we be sure that well intentioned policies, strategies or standards today won't pave a road to future urban problems? This sounds dramatic, but the time it takes for homes and communities to go from plan to delivery to maturity is measured in decades'**

**Left**

*Britain's New Towns: Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities* (Routledge, 2009, £30)

It is a platitude that those who cannot learn from the past are doomed to repeat it, yet, as said in Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys*, 'There is no period of history more remote than the recent past.' We must learn from the past to understand the present, and the New Towns are little understood and often misrepresented, and have been an unfashionable

because the ambitions of the New Towns echo those for sustainable communities – places with a good balance of housing and employment, well connected, family-friendly, and with progressive, high-quality design; and secondly because – despite the best of intentions – over the long term, the quality of many New Towns has declined.

How can we be sure that well intentioned policies, strategies or standards today, such as the Code for Sustainable Homes, won't pave a road to future urban problems? This sounds dramatic, but the time it takes for homes and communities to go from plan to delivery to maturity is measured in decades.

Drift in the original intentions, changes in the wider economic context, or the unanticipated long-term consequences of innovative designs or subtle changes in policy are all clear from the history of the New Towns.

The New Towns also deserve attention for their role as future sustainable communities. They represent a vast investment in effort, resources and

Labour costs, materials and energy are all far higher now. The comparison between recent private-investor-led urban development and the central planning of the wartime economy is also significant, on many levels.

The post-war world was one of austerity and urgency – as well as relief and optimism. Most of today's critics of the New Towns fail to appreciate the reality of Britain in the wake of the Great Depression and the Second World War. The role that they played in national renewal was significant, especially in enabling new industrial sectors to emerge, such as electronics, in which Britain remains a world leader. By 1989, 50% of all the urban centres for high-tech industrial jobs were in New Towns.<sup>3</sup>



**Above**

The urban design principles of the New Towns were largely based on ideas of zoning and the neighbourhood unit developed by Clarence Stein, a founder of the American equivalent of the Garden City Association

capital in the urban form of the nation. The embodied carbon of their built fabric alone challenges any offhand assumption among their critics that they might best be bulldozed and rebuilt. The basic cost of construction today compared with that of 50 or 60 years ago is staggering in comparison.<sup>2</sup> So their 'new for old replacement value' (were one to take the household insurance term) is enormous compared with their original cost. Infrastructure cost alone means development of this scale cannot be readily repeated today.

However, over the last 20 years the New Towns have suffered from demographic pressures, economic pressures, and profound changes in management and ownership. Like any large-scale new development, their population and building stock have aged at the same time. Older towns have greater variety based on repeated waves of migration or re-investment. The New Towns are still extremely young when compared with the rich, historic layers of development in many other British towns. Some of the same challenges of monotone

demographics or housing stocks can also be seen in the rapid development of Victorian towns and cities.

The New Towns were built from a predominantly working class base. The expectation of the early planners that the middle classes would move to them to create balanced communities was confounded by the failure to engage mortgage lenders. Executives managing firms in the New Towns by and large tended to commute in from elsewhere. This economic foundation began to pose problems in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Globalisation and de-industrialisation undermined the towns' manufacturing sectors, and defence cuts in the wake of the end of the Cold War rapidly contracted employment prospects in those New Towns with a strong defence and aerospace presence, including Stevenage, Redditch and Hemel Hempstead.

Today, their foundation in areas like precision engineering leaves the New Towns well positioned to form a vanguard for Britain's green industrial revolution. Their large industrial units, well connected to transport networks and with cheap rents compared with sites in the core cities, means that when the economy recovers, and with a weaker sterling now favouring exports, the New Towns may revive with vigour.

Washington New Town near Sunderland has long been home to the Smith Electric Vehicles company, recently partnered with Ford to make electric versions of Ford trucks and vans for the North American market. The nearby Nissan plant is now also being refitted to make electric cars for European and world markets. Peterborough currently boasts the UK's largest cluster of eco-businesses, and the local council is actively driving its status as an 'eco-city'. Meanwhile, Milton Keynes' strategy is to provide space for new commercial businesses derived from innovations from the top-tier research centres of Oxford, Cambridge and London Universities, each 45 minutes away.

In the post-war period the New Towns' economic base was established in the need to get British industry back on its feet. Many firms in London were keen to move to the New Towns, as existing premises were decrepit or incapable of expansion. The progressive design of the new sites was intended to address known problems of the old cities – namely pollution and congestion – and the result was a hybrid of the Garden City model and the motor-friendly ideas of the Modernists and highways engineers. Radburn, New Jersey and the New Deal towns of Greenbelt, Greendale and Greenhills in the USA provided inspiring exemplars of this combination. In Britain architects such as Gibberd eulogised Howard's vision of the combination of town and country in their modernist designs for towns like Harlow.

The town-scale masterplanning of the New Towns was based on principles of zoning and the neighbourhood unit formulated in a two-way trans-Atlantic dialogue in the first half of the 20th century. In the post-war era, the urban design and architecture of the New Towns parallels reconstruction in the major cities (Leeds, Bristol, Birmingham, Coventry, etc.) and especially the products of the expanded towns programme under the Town Development Act 1952, such as Swindon, Basingstoke and Thetford. Problems and solutions in the New Towns therefore parallel the problems and solutions suggested in these contemporaries.

The most unique thing about the New Towns was the way they were built and managed by bespoke



Photo courtesy of [www.giclarke.com](http://www.giclarke.com)

#### Above

Car-free housing developments in the New Towns offer a clear warning for attempts to re-introduce them today

independent, publicly funded Development Corporations. Independent of local authorities, these were able to plan, build and re-invest proceeds locally in subsequent development, as public sector versions of the privately funded Garden City Company of Howard's model. The role that this unique arrangement was later to play in some towns' subsequent decline is in itself a hugely significant story.

The 'quasi-autonomy' of each New Town Development Corporation was essential to their ability to deliver urban growth so fast. They were designed to replicate the positive feedback model advanced at Welwyn Garden City, where each stage of development, once completed and rented, helped to fund the next stage. But exactly for how long the Development Corporations were supposed to do this remained unresolved in the earliest years of the programme. Howard had intended the Garden City Company to run indefinitely as a protean, local welfare state. In reality, although the Letchworth company survives to this day (in the form of Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation), the Welwyn company was effectively nationalised as the New Town Development Corporation for Welwyn and Hatfield.

By 1961, as part of the legislation to create a second wave of New Towns initiated by the Macmillan Government, a central body, the Commission for the New Towns, was brought into being. This was to facilitate the transfer of the Development Corporation assets of towns that had reached their target populations and whose Corporations were being wound up, with a 'shrewd discretion' controlled from the centre.

With Macmillan's second phase of the New Towns taken forward by the Wilson Government in 1964, additional New Towns were starting to take shape in the early 1970s, while the first phase New Towns were nearing completion. Increasingly turbulent economic conditions in this period, with wildly fluctuating interest rates, prompted concern as to the ongoing financial viability of these towns. J.B. Cullingworth's official history of British planning up until 1979, drawn from Cabinet minutes, shows how civil servants struggled in their analysis of the complex nature of urban development.<sup>4</sup>

This complexity had recently been outlined in Berkeley Professors Webber and Rittel's 1974 paper, 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning'.<sup>5</sup> They defined urban planning as a 'wicked problem'. It was an inherently messy and unpredictable business, incapable of being submitted to a mechanical, rationalist analysis. Since no two towns are the same, easy comparison or control groups proved problematic. Functions such as education, health, employment and transport, each co-located within a town, were under the remits of different government

chaos perplexed them to the point of alarm, but the incoming Conservative Government of 1979 cut this particular Gordian knot in its 'bonfire of the quangos': all remaining Development Corporations were to be wound up as soon as possible, whether or not the New Towns were doing well. Over the following years, the Commission for the New Towns was to 'dispose' of the New Towns' assets in line with the wider agenda of privatisation. Its annual reports outlined the amounts of money gained for the Treasury from selling off the New Towns' shopping centres and industrial sites.

The consequence of the resulting fragmentation of ownership was destructive for places that had been designed and run as coherent wholes. This is perhaps the greatest tragedy of Ebenezer Howard's ambition that specially planned new settlements could emancipate the urban poor; instead of making the urban slum a relic of the past, over time some of the New Towns came to host their own slum-like housing estates.

The lack of flexibility of the urban form amplified the problems. Neighbourhood units could readily descend into sink estates, car-free housing areas and public realm such as pedestrian footpaths, underpasses and cycleways proved crime-prone and expensive to maintain. Detailed testimony from the local authorities in charge of many of these New Towns to the House of Commons Transport, Local Government and the Regions Select Committee in 2002 catalogues these problems.<sup>6</sup>

The ultimate economic cost of these problems in recent years as a result of increases in crime rates, poor health or the other variables now recorded on the Index of Multiple Deprivation perhaps remain unknowable, but might make an interesting research topic for an urban academic today. Two important points extend from these circumstances.

First, a contrary example lies in the fate of the Scottish New Towns. With ultimate responsibility falling under the Secretary of State for Scotland, assets were transferred from Development Corporation control directly to local authority control and not via the Commission for the New Towns.

Scotland's New Towns experience deserves greater assessment. Rogerson's study of quality of life in the UK in 1999 rated Livingston in West Lothian as the second most liveable place in the whole UK.<sup>7</sup> Here, coherent management of the town in the public interest, a good location between Edinburgh and Glasgow, a good natural setting centred on a river valley, and the strong economic vision of Silicon Glen all played significant roles.

Secondly, the sharp decline of the less fortunate New Towns in England during the 1990s is now being addressed by regeneration programmes, and through their position in growth areas or growth points. This silver lining is a complement to their new economic prospects as centres of the green



Photo courtesy of www.cjclarke.com

#### Above

High-quality design may win accolades when brand new, but how well things age is of vital importance

departments. (Co-ordination across these departmental silos is now far better understood as a paramount concern for new community building. The ability to control these at the municipal level in other countries also contributes to their success in creating new developments.)

At the time, the inability of the officials to answer seemingly simple questions amid this apparent



### Above

New eco-housing at Oxley Park, Milton Keynes – ‘the role of the New Towns as progressive housing exemplars has returned’

industrial revolution. With all remaining New Towns assets held by the Commission for the New Towns passing to English Partnerships (EP, now the Homes and Communities Agency) under New Labour, and with the decision that all EP land must be developed to the Code for Sustainable Homes standards, the New Towns are coming to host some of the UK’s largest eco-housing developments.

Upton in Northampton, Oxley Park in Milton Keynes and Lightmoor Village in Telford host thousands of new eco-homes. Further major development sites across the other New Towns, such as the former RAF College in Bracknell,

## ‘Debates on localism, new forms of delivery body or how progressive design risks becoming dogmatic are all areas in which the lessons of the New Towns should be taken forward’

expansion plans for Hemel Hempstead, and the Carbon Challenge site in Peterborough, will continue this trend. The role of the New Towns as progressive housing exemplars has returned – although the persistent negative connotations attached to New Towns have led to this fact being widely overlooked. To see how successfully the first Code housing is being delivered we must focus our attention on the New Towns.<sup>8</sup>

The New Towns deserve greater attention as a major aspect of Britain’s built form, and also of its

cultural heritage. This attention must come from planning, architecture and urban design professionals. The residents of the New Towns know full well the positive points about their town, and are often embittered by continual sniping in the national press. The New Towns have become lazily framed as an ill-advised, utopian or socialist experiment, despite their role in benefiting private enterprise and providing homes and jobs for people that needed them. Numerous myths persist about the New Towns, and because they are places that people rarely feel a compulsion to visit, their significance is widely underestimated.

Debates on localism, new forms of delivery body or how progressive design risks becoming dogmatic are all areas in which the lessons of the New Towns should be taken forward. The research undertaken for the *Britain’s New Towns* book provides a fresh introduction and overview, attempting to place the New Towns in their historical context and reveal something about the sustainable communities of the future. The next step is to learn more and then apply this to benefit the ongoing ambition of making places where people will want to live and work.

● **Anthony Alexander** is Director for Studies and Research at engineering and masterplanning consultancy Alan Baxter & Associates ([www.alanbaxter.co.uk](http://www.alanbaxter.co.uk)), advising on sustainability and masterplanning issues, including the UK Government’s Eco-Towns Initiative, and development plans in the New Towns. His new book, *Britain’s New Towns: Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities*, is published by Routledge (July 2009), price £30. The views expressed here are personal.

### Notes

- 1 A. Alexander: *Britain’s New Towns: Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities*. Routledge, 2009
- 2 See the academic research facility [www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com)
- 3 *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns*. Oxford Brookes University Department of Planning, for Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006, p.63. [www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/151717.pdf](http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/151717.pdf)
- 4 J.B. Cullingworth: *Environmental Planning 1939-69*. Vol. 3: *New Towns Policy*. Stationery Office Books, 1979, p.530
- 5 H. Rittel and M. Webber: ‘Dilemmas in a general theory of planning’. *Policy Sciences*, 1973, Vol. 4, 155-69
- 6 *The New Towns: Their Problems and Future*. Select Committee on Transport, Local Government and the Regions. House of Commons, 2002. [www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmtlgr/603/60302.htm](http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmtlgr/603/60302.htm)
- 7 R. Rogerson: ‘Quality of life and city competitiveness’. *Urban Studies*, 1999, Vol. 36, 5-6
- 8 Community web forums now allow the experiences of new occupants to be freely shared – see, for example, <http://oxleywoodsliving.co.uk/>