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**The English new towns since 1946: What are the lessons of their history for their future?**

**Clapson, M.**

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# Histoire Urbaine

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# Histoire Urbaine

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# Histoire Urbaine

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# Histoire Urbaine

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Mark Clapson*

# The English New Towns since 1946

## What are the Lessons of their History for their Future?

Britain made a hugely important contribution to the planning of new communities during the twentieth century. The establishment of the garden cities of Letchworth in 1903 and of Welwyn from 1920 was accompanied by, and indeed was influential upon, the growth of the town planning movement in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century.[1] This culminated in two important pieces of legislation: the New Towns Act of 1946, with which this article is mostly concerned, and the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947[2].

### Introduction: the new towns in context

The new towns programme in postwar Britain was one of the few *grands projets* of the British state during the twentieth century. Out of the rubble of the Blitz during the Second World War, the boldest solution to the postwar housing problem was the New Towns Act of 1946[3]. It was a keystone in the reconstruction of the so-called 'New Jerusalem' promised by the Labour Party in its general election campaign towards the end of the war. Sections of the populations of bombed-out

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1. Peter Hall and Colin Ward, *Sociable Cities: the Legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, Chichester, Wiley, 1998, p. 41-69.

2. Stephen V. Ward, *Planning and Urban Change*, London, Sage, 2004, p. 92-102.

3. Mark Clapson, « Destruction and dispersal: the Blitz and the "break-up" of working-class London », Mark Clapson and P.J. Larkham (eds.) *The Blitz and its Legacy: Wartime Destruction to Postwar Reconstruction* Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, p. 107.

and overcrowded cities were dispersed into planned new communities in the provinces[4]. It is important to note, however, that the momentum for decentralisation existed before the bombs started to fall in September 1940 : the Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population, appointed in 1937 under the chairmanship of the Lord Barlow, was a long-overdue initiative. It was also unwitting testimony to the fact that the Garden City movement, rather than the Government in Whitehall, had for many years demonstrated a workable solution to the environmental problems of the unplanned Victorian industrial cities whose legacy blighted so much of Britain's urban landscape.

The Barlow Report on the Distribution of the Industrial Population was published in 1940, and welcomed by leading campaigners for garden-city-influenced new towns. The foremost among these proponents of decentralisation in the form of a large-scale programme of new towns was Frederic Osborn. He was a socialist, a supporter of the Labour Party, and he had been closely involved with the management and social life of both Letchworth and Welwyn. In fact, he was living in Welwyn by the time the wartime debates about dispersal were beginning – debates to which Osborn contributed significantly. Osborn argued that the Blitz « opened up new vistas for town planning » in his republished *New Towns after the War* (1942). The book was initially published during the First World War as part of the unsuccessful lobbying by the founders of Letchworth for a programme of new communities founded on the principles of decentralisation and designed according to Ebenezer Howard's precepts laid out in his *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, first published in 1898. But Osborn was aware that both the Blitz in the short term and the Garden City movement since the early twentieth century had created the rationale for relieving the older cities of some of their population[5]. The creation of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning in 1943 and the first majority Labour Government from May 1945 came together to create the national Town and Country planning apparatus, framed in the New Towns Act of 1946 and the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947.

Following the New Towns Act, over 20 new towns were built in Britain, most of them in England, with which this chapter is concerned. Among the most famous of them were the eight London new towns : Basildon ; Bracknell ; Crawley ; Hatfield ; Harlow ; Hemel Hempstead ; Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City. All were designated before 1950 and most were

4. Anthony Alexander, *Britain's New Towns : Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities*, London, Routledge, p. 19-20.

5. Frederic J. Osborn, *New Towns After the War*, London, J.M. Dent, 1942, p. 13.

intended to eventually house at least 50,000 people. Welwyn was re-classified as a new town by the Government in 1948, a symbolic connection between the garden city movement and the new towns that they had influenced. It was allowed to keep its long-standing name of Welwyn Garden City. The new towns in general and the London new towns in particular are generally recognised to have made a significant improvement in the housing shortage in the capital city. Although they accorded with the decentralisation drive in the *Greater London Plan* of 1944, they were not a product of that plan, but of the New Towns Act[6].

Many thousands of people were relocated and rehoused in the 1940s new towns, but the new settlements were not doing enough to address the growing problem of the postwar housing shortage. Rates of fertility increased dramatically in the United Kingdom following the Second World War, the so-called « baby boom » which lasted until the 1960s. The ensuing rapid growth in the number of households, in alliance with the influence of garden city planning at the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, meant that additional new towns were built during the 1960s. Historians have heatedly debated the nature of a wider political « consensus » over domestic policies, but it is certainly the case that despite ideological differences, both Conservative and Labour parties were committed to programmes of new towns to address the growing demand for housing. From 1959 the Conservative government initiated an unimpressive tranche of new towns (with unattractive names), namely Runcorn and Skelmersdale for Merseyside, and Dawley (later Telford) and Redditch for the West Midlands. Washington Tyne and Wear was also begun in the North East of the country[7]. The function of these new towns was similar to that of the London new towns, as they relieved population pressure on the large urban conurbations of Liverpool on Merseyside, and Birmingham in the West Midlands[8]. The Conservative (Tory) government also introduced a new agency to assist new town development, the Commission for New Towns (CNT), operational from the early 1960s until the mid-1990s[9].

It was the Labour government of Harold Wilson, however, which had the grandest vision for planned new communities during the 1960s. The New Towns Act of 1965 created some of the largest new towns in postwar

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6. Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century*, London, Viking, 2001, p. 59.

7. Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties*, London, Little Brown, 2006, p. 178.

8. J. Barry Cullingworth, *Town and Country Planning in Britain*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1974, p. 235.

9. Stephen V. Ward, *Planning and Urban Change*, op cit, p. 161-62.
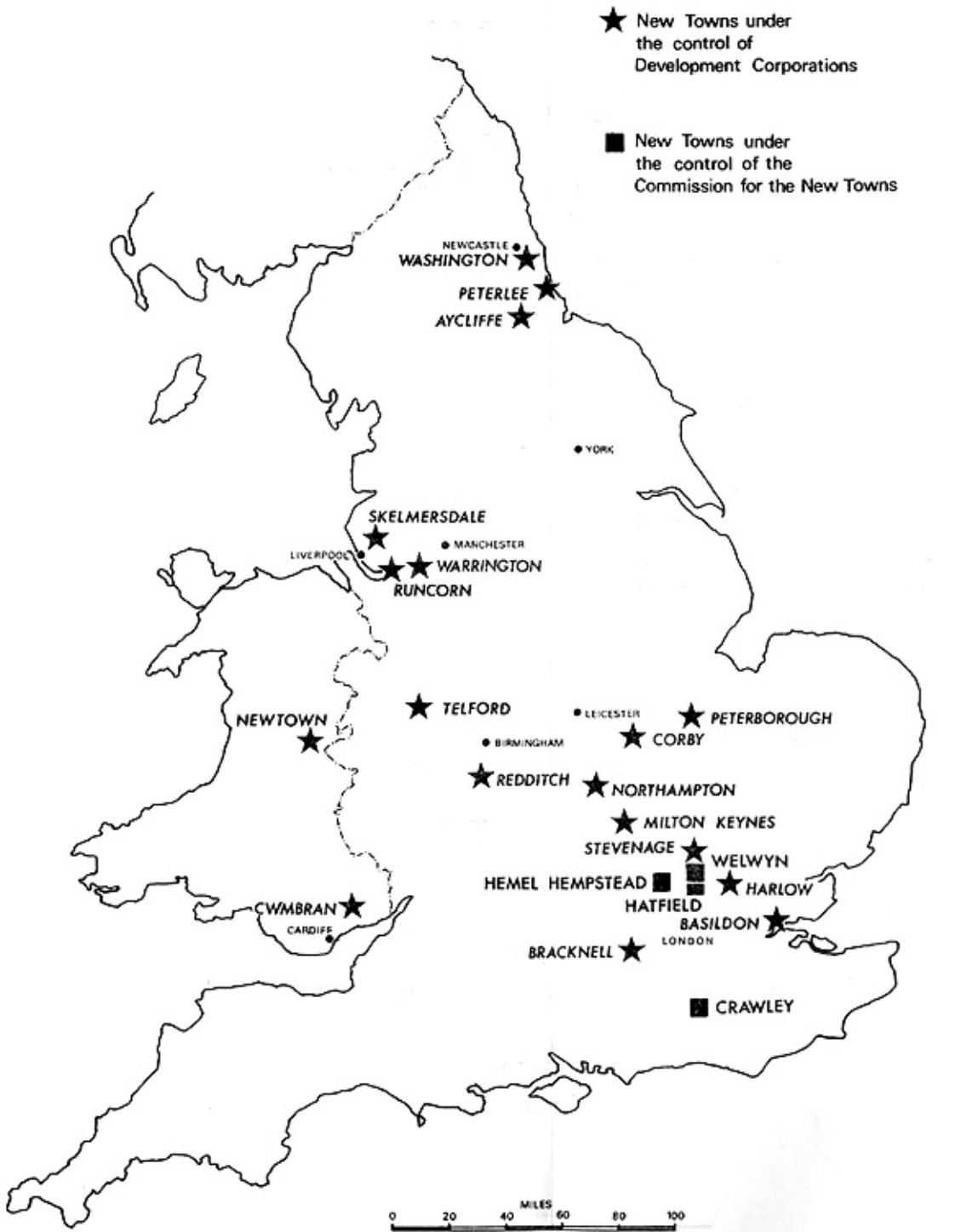
*Figure 1 : Map of new towns in England and Wales, 1969, produced for the Commission for New Towns.*
*Source :* http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/sixties-britain/map-new-towns/

Britain. Some – such as Northampton and Peterborough in East Anglia – were long-established towns but now given new town status, and expanded beyond their traditional boundaries. By far the most famous of the 1960s new towns, however, has become the largest of them. Milton Keynes in Buckinghamshire, designated in 1967, is some 70 kilometres north of London. Initially covering 13,000 hectares and aiming for a target population of 250,000 people, its designated area contained a number of small towns and villages but was mostly comprised of green fields[10]. Its original population was mostly drawn from London, and for that reason it has been viewed by social historians as a « London new town ». But in the years since 1980 the population of Milton Keynes was increasingly drawn from far and wide, nationally and internationally[11]. Today, over two million people live in urban entities constructed mostly from a *tabula rasa* during the second half of the twentieth century. The London new towns, including Milton Keynes, now house half a million people[12].

## Five key planning principles

This chapter will critically examine five fundamental planning principles that informed new town planning from the end of the Second World War, namely the creation of socially mixed and balanced communities that represented the national class structure; the related intention to encourage an active community and neighbourhood life as opposed to the alleged atomisation and anonymity of the big city; the principle of separation between pedestrians and road traffic in communications and road planning; the goals of economic self-containment as evidenced in a drive to attract industry and employment; and governance, within which the development corporation model was empowered as the key delivery agency, working in partnership with local authorities and voluntary-sector organisations. Each of these principles now has an awkward and even problematic relationship with current government policies that emphasise sustainability in the design of new communities. So this article sets out to show that what was popular with the British new town dwellers is being

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10. Mark Clapson, *A Social History of Milton Keynes: Middle England/Edge City*, London, Frank Cass, 2007.

11. *Ibidem,* p. 90-102.

12. Town and Country Planning Association, *New Towns and Garden Cities: Lessons for Tomorrow*, London, TCPA, 2014, p. 2 (available online; accessed September, 2015); Jerry White, *London, op. cit.*, p. 59.

ignored as the principles and practices that inform 'sustainable new communities' override democracy.

These five tenets were first discussed by the New Towns Committee chaired by John Reith, the former Director General of the BBC. The New Towns Committee sat from late 1945 to the summer of 1946. It was a forum for politicians, town planners, architects and liberal social reformers to thrash out the principles for new town government and development which were enshrined in the New Towns Act passed in August 1946 [13]. The town planners who worked on or contributed to the New Towns Committee represented the Garden City tradition that had begun with Letchworth and continued with Welwyn. Osborn, for example, was a key advisor to the committee, and he had been a leading light in the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association, which later became the Town and Country Planning Association in 1941 [14]. Although he was actively involved in all aspects of new town planning, he took a particular interest in social planning, particularly « social welfare facilities and equipment for new towns » [15].

## Socially mixed and balanced communities

Garden cities had aimed to be socially mixed and balanced communities, and this ethos in social planning was shared by the new towns, in no small part due to the work of Osborn and other garden city planners on the New Towns Committee. Housing provision was at the heart of the success or failure of social mixing. The Committee was adamant that in order to « secure a true social balance, dwellings of all classes must be built in due proportions » [16]. This entailed a historic move away from privately provided rental homes in new towns to housing supplied by the agency (the development corporation, described in more detail below) that would develop the new towns. It also connected up housing supply with economic development :

13. Ministry of Town and Country Planning (MTCP), *Final Report of the New Towns Committee*, Cmd. 6876, London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1946.

14. Michael Hughes, « Osborn, Sir Frederic James, town planner and writer », *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, (accessed July 2015).

15. Gordon Cherry, *Town Planning in Britain since 1900*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, p. 106 ; National Archives : HLG 84/7 : New Towns Committee ; *Minutes of Proceedings and Agenda, 1945-47 : Minutes of First and Second Meetings, 24 and 25 October, 1946.*

16. MTCP, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

« The agency itself must be prepared to undertake housing on a considerable scale. It will have to ensure a sufficiency of houses for the staffs and workers coming to the town. [It] should see that larger as well as smaller houses are built and houses for sale as well as letting... » [17]

Although the new towns were, as noted above, intended to represent the national class demographic, particularly within the context of class, the question of ethnicity was absent from the deliberation of the New Towns Committee. Class was the overriding variable when populations of the new towns were mooted, and those populations were to live locally in neighbourhood units, an Anglo-American design for social planning whose provenance has been much discussed [18]. The Labour Minister for Town and Country Planning, Lewis Silkin, steered the 1946 New Towns Act through the House of Parliament. His arguments turned out to be utterly naïve :

« The towns will be divided into neighbourhood units, each unit with its own shops, schools, open spaces, community halls and other amenities. [I] am most anxious that the planning should be such that the different income groups living in the new towns will not be segregated. No doubt they may enjoy common recreational facilities, and take part in amateur theatricals, or each play their part in a health centre or a community centre. But when they leave to go home I do not want the better-off people to go to the right, and the less-well-off to go to the left. I want them to ask each other 'are you going my way ? » [19]

Although new town residential areas were indeed planned to neighbourhood unit principles during the 1940s and 1950s, the social idealism of the first postwar Labour government was not realised. The new towns built after the 1946 Act did not become bastions of social class mixing : they did nothing to break down status and class divisions because by the 1960s they had become largely single-class, i.e. working-class towns [20]. The majority of households were headed by skilled and semi-skilled wage earners. Many moved through the so-called Industrial Selection Scheme, a mechanism introduced in the late 1940s that offered both employment and housing to workers who were willing to leave older cities, including London, for the new towns, as well as for 'expanded towns' such as Swindon and

17. *Ibidem.*

18. Peter Collison, « Town planning and the neighbourhood unit concept », *Public Administration*, 32 ; 4 1954, p. 463-69 ; Clapson (1998), p. 160-162.

19. Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons (Hansard), Fifth Series, Vol. 422, 1945-46, cols. 1089-90.

20. Geoffrey Gibson, 'New town ghettos', *Socialist Commentary*, April, 1959, p. 12-14.

Thetford[21]. Poorer families and households were mostly excluded from moving to new towns because of the relatively high rents charged by development corporations for housing[22]. The middle classes tended to avoid new towns partly because of their overwhelmingly proletarian character, but also because many homes were built to unpopular modern designs and had the feeling of large-scale low-density anonymous housing projects about them[23]. As one possibly lonely middle-class resident of Hemel Hempstead complained to the conservative periodical *The Spectator* in 1959 : « There is no imagination or planning behind the layout of the community... the community resembles a modern chicken farm, every chicken alone in its identical box.... »[24] The majority of people with sufficient incomes to enjoy housing choice clearly preferred more traditional suburban housing than was supplied by many new town development corporations.

Tenure, however, was the main reason for the dearth of middle-class households in new towns. Prior to the 1960s, New Town Development Corporations had simply not provided enough homes for purchase. The intention of the New Towns Committee to supply housing both for rent and home ownership was distorted by the actions of the development corporations themselves, which became significant public landlords. Prior to the 1960s at least, they failed to encourage not only enough housing for sale to attract more affluent households, but also to incorporate a wide variety of other housing providers, notably housing associations. Hence by 31 December 1966, of all housing completions in new towns, those by development corporations numbered 134,122 (84 %) compared to just 14,463 by local authorities (9 %) and a paltry 10, 557 (7 %) by private builders[25].

This problem was rectified to a degree by the Commission for New Towns from 1960, which pursued a policy of providing more homes for private ownership[26]. And following the New Towns Act of 1965, a new generation of development corporations aimed to provide for 50 % housing for rent (now called social housing) and 50 % for owner-occupa-

21. J.Barry Cullingworth, « Social implications of overspill : the Worsley social survey », *Sociological Review* (New Series) Vol. 8, No. 1, 1960, p. 77-80 ; *idem,* « The Swindon social survey : a second report on the social implications of overspill »,, *Sociological Review* (New Series), Vol. 9, No. 2, 1961 p. 153-160.

22. Lloyd Rodwin, *The British New Towns Policy : Problems and Implications*, Cambridge, Mass., 1956, p. 82.

23. B.J. Heraud, « Social class and the new towns », *Urban Studies*, 5 : 1, 1968, p. 38-39.

24. Cited in David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain : Opening the Box, 1957-59*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 294.

25. Town and Country Planning Journal, *New Towns Special Issue*, London, Town and Country Planning Association, 1967, p. 38.

26. Frank Schaffer, *The New Towns Story*, London, Granada, 1972, p. 235-236 ; 239.

tion. Even this plan, however, was undermined by Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative Prime Minister of Britain from 1979 to 1990. The 1980 Housing Act put a squeeze on financing public sector rentals, and allowed new town development corporation rental tenants to purchase their own homes[27]. Today, a tenure divide runs through new towns just as in longer-established towns. And in the new towns, there are now poor housing areas. These are more likely to have been experimental modern designs, and are dominated by rental tenure and a comparative lack of home ownership. Segregation is more extensive than in other more class-mixed or middle-class housing districts.

Class segregation was increasingly influenced by and compounded by the growing influx of poorer immigrant groups and people of colour into new towns. Mass immigration into Britain from the West Indies, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh during the 1950s and 1960s, and the growing number of economic migrants from Eastern Europe since the accession of the United Kingdom to the European Union in 1973, have been signi-ficant influences upon the demography of the new towns. It was noted above that in the more homogenous Britain of the early postwar years, social mixing was largely concerned with class balance and encouraging spatial interactions between the middle classes and the working classes. As Britain and its planned new communities became more ethnically diverse, racism and segregation increasingly became a concern of the new town development corporations, politicians and academics. A 1990s study of «invisible minorities» in the new towns, with a particular focus upon Harlow in Essex, found that black groups had been increasingly present in planned new communities, but were still under-represented in relation to their overall percentages in the national demographic. People of colour were also more concentrated in the poorest housing areas, and more likely to be in low-paid employment or to be unemployed. In common with older established towns, these socio-economic inequalities were com-pounded by discriminatory practices. These problems were unwitting proof that new town development corporations were no more able to produce harmonious race relations and equality between different ethnic groups than those that existed in older towns and cities[28]. Furthermore, during the 1990s and the early years of the present century, there was little concerted corporate policy on behalf of English Partnerships (1997-) and

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27. Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 59.

28. John Wrench, Harbhajan Brarand, Paul Martin, *Invisible Minorities: Racism in New Towns and in New Contexts*, Coventry, Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick, 1993 (available online).

its successor the Homes and Communities Agency (2008-) to address the problems of ethnic minorities. Instead, this was largely the responsibility of individual new town councils. As new towns matured, their governance was increasingly akin to that of established towns, and the initial aims of social mix and balance at both neighbourhood and town-wide levels became diluted. Despite this, however, there is some compelling evidence that in the promotion of a local culture of community and association the new town development corporations had some success, both in the short term and up to the present day.

## Community and association in the new towns

There is considerable contemporary evidence, across the postwar decades, that the new towns did actually generate a sense of community and belonging that was perhaps stronger than in established towns and cities. There is also evidence that levels of active association – i.e. of joining clubs, groups and societies either for leisure and recreation or for philanthropic or political purposes – have been higher in some new towns than in older urban settlements. During the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, a powerful reason for this was the similarity of many newcomers to the towns : most were white and working class. Studies of new towns in the 1950s found, for example, that although there were minor status diffe-rences, there was a considerable level of homogeneity among new town populations. There was also a preponderance of younger families with children, or of young couples just about to start families. They moved to the new town for the better housing it offered when compared with esta-blished cities and towns[29]. Hence an unintended consequence of the failure to produce mixed and balanced new communities was an easy familiarity with new neighbours of a similar class and age background. The development corporations were tasked by the New Towns Committee of 1945-46 to provide at least one building as a multi-purpose meeting place, and development corporations also provided 'arrivals workers' to facilitate information flow and social connection between new citizens[30].

Certainly a move to a new town could be an empowering experience, introducing people to new social opportunities. The rawness of the as-yet unfinished new town was also a stimulus to forming a neighbourhood. As one woman who moved to Stevenage in the late 1940s recalled :

29. Mark Clapson, (1998), p. 62-95 ; 171.
30. MTCP, *Final Report, op. cit.*, p. 42-47.

« Our house was one of the first few blocks of houses to be built in this area, and we all moved in within a few weeks of each other, and as there was nothing else here, everyone was very friendly. When each neighbour moved in, they were brought a cup of tea. »

« When I first came here I was young. I lived [in London] with my in-laws. I was very shy, very retiring, never went anywhere in London without my husband. [Then] coming down here, because we had to make our own entertainments, getting involved in the women's clubs gave me confidence and made me really branch out in so many other things. I am sure I would not have done half the things that I have been able to do here if I had stayed in London all these years. » [31]

It is doubtful whether the neighbourhood unit itself was a mechanism for producing community. Sociological research during the 1950s found that most young families living in a neighbourhood unit enjoyed patterns of mobility, sociability and leisure that far transcended the immediate locality. In an increasingly affluent and mobile society, where the automobile was becoming commonplace, people were participating in town-wide, region-wide and even national and international relationships [32].

The neighbourhood unit had basically failed to contain aspirations for wider patterns of spatial mobility, but that did not mean that community participation was consequently less vigorous than in older urban or rural communities. What Ebenezer Howard and Fredric Osborn had failed to really fully understand was that localism was only one force for the community life of a person, a family and a community.

With such findings in mind, the generation of new towns that came into existence following the 1965 New Towns Act took a different approach. Milton Keynes Development Corporation ditched the neighbourhood unit concept, because the organisation saw the grid of roads as serving the city of the future, a future where « community » was envisaged in more flexible less-localising ways. The influence of the American urban theorist Melvin Webber, with his ideas of « community without propinquity » and the « non-place urban realm » determined the mobility-friendly cityscape of Milton Keynes. Webber was based at the University of California, Berkeley, and was invited to London to brief the planners of Milton Keynes on the relationship between technology and social change, and technology and environmental uses. Furthermore, the expansion in the use of the telephone, and since 1994 the Internet, have demonstrated to all except the most ardent pessimist that community life, based upon shared interests

31. Huw and Connie Rees, *The History Makers: The Story of the Early Days of Stevenage New Town*, Stevenage, H. & C. Rees, 1991, p. 94 and p. 100.

32. Ruth Glass, *Clichés of Urban Doom and other essays*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, p. ix, 23, 180.

and attachments, is maintained across distances, as Webber envisaged. Milton Keynes was also cabled up, for television and telephone, along the grass verges that lined the roads[33].

Nonetheless, local community was not completely jettisoned. Residential areas in Milton Keynes were provided with a variety of key services and facilities, notably schools, parklands, pedestrian-only paths and retail facilities. Moreover, each residential area was provided with a « Meeting Place », another name for the « Community Centre ». These were to become hubs of local informality and community participation. And as with earlier new towns, arrivals workers facilitated adaptation of the incomers to the new town[34].

In all this, the new towns had some successes. As the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) argued, in its 2006 report *Transferable Lessons from New Towns* : « The New Towns appear to have more community organisations than areas of older cities with comparable socio-economic characteristics. » The DCLG also pointed out that the new town development corporations had taken more steps to involve local people in governance than older towns by promoting citizens groups to liaise with the corporation itself, but also with the town council. Broadly speaking, the new towns appear to have created the basis for a higher level of participation in local groups, clubs and associations than in older established towns. From ostensibly non-political leisure activities to civic issues, the new towns – no matter which decade they came into existence, and despite differences in urban design – have a good record of participation thanks to the efforts of the development corporations[35].

### Communications and road planning : traffic and pedestrian separation

The New Towns Committee had debated and recommended a road system for the new towns which segregated pedestrians from traffic. This principle was to a significant degree derived from the planned new 'automobile suburb' in Radburn, New Jersey, initiated during the 1920s,

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33. Anthony Alexander, *Britain's New Towns, op. cit.*, p. 43, 87-8, 122, 146.

34. Milton Keynes Development Corporation, *The Plan for Milton Keynes* (Volume 2), Milton Keynes MKDC, 1970, p. 122-123.

35. Department of Communities and Local Government, *Transferable Lessons from New Towns* (London : DCLG, 2006), p. 57.

although the Committee did not acknowledge that in their final report[36]. As the report stated:

> « The road system should be planned for safety as well as freedom of movement and amenity. The points to be borne in mind include:
> 1) Vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians on the main radial and ring roads to be segregated
> 2) No routes for heavy traffic to pass through the shopping or civic centre or residential precincts
> 3) Adequate width of roads where vehicles have to set down and take up passengers, as in shopping areas
> 4) Pedestrian crossings on traffic roads to be as few as possible. »[37]

Both the post-1946 new towns and those built from the 1960s saw a separation of pedestrians from motorised traffic in a series of dedicated walkways that avoided conflict, via underpasses and overpasses, with the road system. Planners were adamant that garden-city-style roads and boulevards should facilitate the speediest flow of traffic, and there was to be no building or incoming pedestrian routes onto roads that would interfere with traffic flow. Yet attractive landscaping on both sides of the roads was also an aspect of environmental policy. This was evident in the early postwar new towns. At Harlow in Essex, for example, whose master plan was drawn up by the prominent modern architect-planner Frederick Gibberd of the London County Council, the major roads were treated not simply as the shortest way to get from one point to another but envisioned « as part of the wider picture », ferrying motor vehicles at relatively safe distances from walkers and cyclists while possessing visual amenity – aesthetically attractive landscaping that afforded the motorist views of the new town. In common with other new towns, Harlow was also equipped with a network of shared cycle and pedestrian routes, also separated from the main roads and secondary roads by overpasses and underpasses. There were some early complaints from residents about dual use of these cycleways, and some attempt to try to manage this through the indication of designated signage for walkers and cyclists, but the problem abated over time[38].

Segregation of vehicle from pedestrian movement was also at the heart of transport and communications in the new towns planned during the

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36. On Radburn see Robert A. M. Stern with Hugh M. Massengale, *The Anglo-American Suburb*, London, Architectural Design Profile, 1981, p. 84.

37. MTCP, *Final Report, op. cit.*, p. 28.

38. Frederick Gibberd, Ben Hyde Harvey, Len White and other contributors, *Harlow: Story of a New Town*, Stevenage, Publications for Companies, 1980, p. 49-51.

1960s, but the most sophisticated and expansive expression of Radburn principles was to be found in Milton Keynes. Planned between 1967 and 1970, Milton Keynes is dominated by a system of American-style grid roads, hence it was once dubbed « the little Los Angeles of North Buckinghamshire » by an architectural critic writing for the *Guardian* newspaper[39]. The grid roads were called 'city roads' in the planning materials issued by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) and were built to an impressive scale. The busiest roads are duel carriageways, while lesser primary roads are single carriageways. Expansive green verges on both sides of the grid roads carry cabling for telephones and electricity, but serve a further purpose as linear spaces that can be used for road widening where traffic usage increases[40]. As with Harlow and the earlier new towns, the road system is complemented by a « green grid » or a system of walking and cycling routes that is also designed to minimise conflict between road users and those on bicycle or foot. This is known as the « redway » system after the colour of the tarmac[41].

  Broadly speaking, the transport infrastructure of the new towns has been a success story, but planning for higher levels of motorisation is now anathema to both the urbanism and new urbanism that dominate planning agendas. The current orthodoxy, however, is far from passively accepted by citizens of the new towns, both the first-generation new towns and those planned during the 1960s. In Milton Keynes, for example, there is now an almost emotional as well as practical battle going on between planners and residents who want to preserve low-density motorised living, and open spaces, and the New Urbanist tendency who want to introduce mixed-use streets, reduce spatial provision for cars, and fill parklands with housing. This is a nuanced question : the spacious single-carriageway and dual-carriageway grid road system, with no buildings fronting onto the roads, is popular with most people in Milton Keynes, but contrary to currently fashionable planning for sustainable transport and « sustainable » high density housing. A pressure group called « Urban Eden » has challenged the attempts by Milton Keynes Council to change the uses of the grid roads, and to introduce what have been called « city streets » to the transport corridors and residential grid squares of Milton Keynes. The gathering support for the grid was first noticeable in the early years of

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39. Tim Mars, « Little Los Angeles in Bucks », *Architect's Journal*, 15 April 1992.

40. Milton Keynes Development Corporation, *The Plan for Milton Keynes*, Volume 2 [...] Milton Keynes Development Corporation, *The Milton Keynes Planning Manual*, Milton Keynes, MKDC, 1992, p. 43-55.

41. Commission for New Towns, *The Planning of Milton Keynes*, Milton Keynes, Commission for New Towns, not dated, p. 7-9.

this century, when the Council in tandem with English Partnerships attempted to experiment with a change of appearance and use of the V10, also known as Brickhill Street. A number of citizens' groups, mostly comprised of articulate middle-class professionals and residents, have angrily challenged the change of use for the grid roads. In tandem, they have also attacked Milton Keynes Council for planning to build homes on parklands, a campaign that has echoes in other towns where green spaces are staunchly defended by locals who prefer lower-density green-ringed housing estates [42]. They love the lower densities and open spaces, a point many urbanists fail to grasp.

## *Economic self-containment*

In common with their garden city progenitors, the new towns were not to become dormitories, like garden suburbs, but were intended to become economically self-sustaining. People who lived in the new towns were also to take employment in the same town. The first new towns during the 1940s and 1950s offered those who chose to move there from the older cities not only employment but also a front door key to a new family home.

This was intended to prevent mass commuting by providing employment locally to sustain a working population, and also to enable a taxable base for local government and urban amenities. This much-cherished principle of the Garden City movement was never fully realised, however: neither Letchworth nor Welwyn Garden City achieved an economy that generated sufficient levels of employment for all of their local people. This was painfully evident even before the Second World War, but advocates for the garden city model ignored these realities while continuing to endorse the principle of economic self-containment to the New Towns Committee of 1945-46. The postwar new towns also shared this qualified failure.

However, the new towns avoided becoming soulless dormitories like so many suburbs. New Town Development Corporations held considerable powers to subsidise companies investing in the new towns. The consequent reduction in capital costs led thousands of companies to relocate or establish themselves in new towns, and most people working in new towns lived in the same town. And unlike suburbs, new towns were provided with town centres with shops and leisure facilities. The centre was to be the focus of town life and identity, but many centres became synonymous with poor

42. http://urbaneden.org/ (accessed October 2015); *The Comet* (Stevenage) 30 January, 2014 (available online; accessed October 2015).

modern design. People often went to older towns for their shopping or their Saturday nights out, also compromising the principle of self-containment.

The Internet hosts many websites holding data on self-containment, not only for new towns but also for established towns and cities. This suggests that an aspiration once pioneered by the Garden City movement and adopted by the New Towns Committee of 1945-46 has become universalised within the sustainability agenda. Overall, however, the goal of self-containment was never achieved in the postwar new towns, with many not even achieving 50 % percent of citizens living and working in the same borough. Milton Keynes came closest, however, with over 80 % percent of workers finding employment in the borough during the first decade of this century [43].

The picture is uneven, however. New towns in more prosperous regions have fared better than those in the more peripheral regions of the British Isles. This is demonstrated by the example of Milton Keynes, the largest of the postwar new towns. A recent report from January 2015 by the Centre for Cities shows that Milton Keynes now has the highest number of business start-ups in the United Kingdom, and is synonymous with education (the Open University), retailing, retail distribution, finance, and high-tech manufacturing. Milton Keynes also has a vibrant Shopping Building whose architecture was influenced by Mies Van Der Rohe. This stands in stark contrast, however, to the lacklustre economic performance and town centres of much smaller new towns such as Peterlee in the northeast of England, or the new towns in Wales. It appears that size matters. Furthermore, proximity to the huge economic powerhouse of London is a major advantage. Yes, as we will see below, the current and next generation of garden cities are relatively small.

## Governance : the development corporations as delivery agencies

The New Towns Committee of 1945-46 had worked hard to devise the system of governance for the new towns, which were to be brought into place and then governed for at least 25 years by the New Town Development Corporations. Each development corporation was headed by a General Manager, a Master Planner, the Chief Architect and a number of other senior posts. It was tasked with drawing up the Master Plan for its new town. The development corporation possessed the so-called power of

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43. http://www.cannockchasedc.gov.uk/sites/default/files/104studȳof_commuting_patterns_2008. pdf (accessed August 2015).

eminent domain': it was a commanding delivery organisation, with significant powers over compulsory land purchase, and with extensive financial authority from the Treasury, to see its plans into existence, and to be a strong negotiator with local councils and business interests [44].

However, in the years since 1980, the new towns development corporation model has declined. (This is a different model to the Development Corporations which were introduced to regenerate the docklands areas of Britain's cities during the Conservative governments of the 1980s. The latter were more akin to urban development corporations working with existing urban conglomerations rather than the relatively blank canvas that most new towns presented.) A series of agencies have taken up the reins: as noted above, the Commission for New Towns absorbed some functions of new town development corporations when they wound down after 25 years. But the CNT itself was terminated in 1997. It was replaced by English Partnerships, which took over land use and development powers until 2008, and then in 2008, English Partnerships was replaced by the Homes and Communities Agency [45].

Against this transient state of affairs, the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) is calling for a resuscitation of what it calls «the staggeringly successful development corporation delivery model». The following is excerpted from its current website:

> «In February 2014 the TCPA published a landmark document into how the UK can deliver the beautiful, inclusive and sustainable communities of the future. The report, *New Towns Act 2015?*, has taken the phenomenally successful New Town Development Corporation model, that delivered 32 new towns after the Second World War and which now home over 2 million people, and updated it for the 21st Century.
>
> The TCPA wants to show how the development corporation model can be updated to make it more democratically accountable and ensure that the vision of high quality, beautiful and inclusive places is achieved.
>
> – New settlements are a vital component of our response to the housing crisis, allowing for cost-effective and sustainable growth.
>
> – The New Towns Act offers a powerful foundation for the delivery of the kinds of high-quality inclusive places that will meet our housing needs in the long term.
>
> – This foundation is based on a specific approach to the designation of land and the creation of New Town Development Corporations to drive effective delivery.» [46]

44. Anthony Alexander, *Britain's New Towns, op. cit.*, p. 28-41.

45. *Ibidem,* p. 169.

46. http://www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/new-towns-act-2015.html (accessed date as above).

Sadly, the new towns were not as inclusive as this lobbying suggests; the development corporations, despite some achievements, were not always « phenomenally successful » as was evidenced by some social failings. However, the things that went wrong with the postwar new towns are still there in history to be learned from. Despite some shortcomings, the development corporation model is indeed better than the current system based upon loose guidelines from central government, and certainly provided effective overall delivery of the Master Plan. This is a superior model to the recent examples of new « eco-towns », diminutive energy-efficient garden-city-style new « garden villages » communities such as Ebbsfleet in Kent, Northstowe in Cambridgeshire, and now Bicester in Oxfordshire. Their development has been painfully slow and lacking in vision. Moreover, the housing in these new communities is of a higher density than the more successful new towns of the postwar years, whose densities were rarely to exceed 15 persons to the acre (0.405 hectare)[47]. That has been changing since 1997, however, when the Labour government of Tony Blair increased densities for all new-build areas under its Planning and Policy Guidance. Even the new towns are, as we have seen above, now seeing more intense levels of residential development.

In May 2015, Britain went to the polls in the general election for the current government. Each of the major political parties – Conservative, Labour and Liberal – promised a programme of garden cities. The Labour Party was the most ambitious with its proposed five new towns to help resolve the housing shortage. It is generally accepted that at least 230 000 new houses will need to be built every year in Britain until 2033 in order to provide enough accommodation for the growing population. The political response has long been inadequate, however. In April 2014, for example, the coalition government from 2010-2015 called for 'locally led garden cities' such as the aforementioned Bicester and Ebbsfleet. They promoted three new garden cities, each with more than 15,000 homes[48]. This is a small-scale solution: it is not really what the garden city and new town movements were about. Small populations will be unable to generate the greater range of social and recreational facilities enjoyed by larger planned urban settlements. It will be interesting to see whether smaller new communities can generate the levels of participation that the larger postwar new towns generated. Economic self-containment would appear to be even less possible, as the example of Milton Keynes, the largest new town, demonstrates due to its size. And the powerful development corporation

47. MTCP, *Final Report, op. cit.*, p. 15.
48. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-27020578 (accessed October, 2015).

model is not on the agenda for the governance of eco-towns. Whatever its shortcomings, the model brought into place some of the largest planned new towns of the twentieth century. A country that was once a leader in innovative new community planning has lost the ability to plan large-scale new communities. Meanwhile, some if not all of the policies that made the new towns such popular places are being modified by higher densities and retro-fitting, key tools of the New Urbanism mostly intended not for planned new communities but for suburbia. At this point in time, the future of the established new towns in Britain is very much in the balance.

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