

# The French and British New Towns Experiments : Lessons for the Future?

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# Some Contextual Information

- There are nine new towns in France (villes nouvelles), 5 in the Greater Paris area, 4 in the provinces (Marseille/Lille/Lyon/Rouen); 3 more were planned but abandoned in 1968.
- They were launched fairly late 1967-1973 because during the Post-war years, the housing crisis was considered a priority and it was decided to solve it in the shape of urban extensions (ZUP). There was a strong anti-urban planning culture in France too.
- They number 1 million residents between them; they experienced rapid demographic growth up to 1990s.
- They were created after an unsuccessful postwar attempt to stem the growth of Paris (although Massy, Anthony and La Defense 1956 were planned) Why stem it? Because of the fear caused by the JF Gravier's 1947 book *Paris et le désert français*.
- They were part of a long-term devolution agenda to the provinces (DATAR 1963, regional spatial strategies 1965-70).
- Also part of a rescaling planning exercise : explained by the emergence of concept of city region: in the Greater Paris area they were part of a major planning exercise to reorganise the area and control its growth through various new vehicles (PADOG 1960, AURP 1960, DSAURP 1965; AFT 1962; ZAD 1968).
- Finally they were started in reaction to the perceived failure of the 'Grand Ensembles' that came to light with H. Leveau's 1959 book *Le droit à la ville* and to a demographic boom discovered in 1962.

# Key Characteristics

- They were planned from a central unit in government. The first planning mission was set up in 1966 in the central government, then each new town was developed by a specific body (EPA) with land assembly and compulsory purchase powers and preemption of land powers, selling powers and building powers (similar to new towns corporations in UK); streets were paid for by the state.
- They were tasked with the same objectives: reorganize suburbs; reduce commuting; offer real urban centres; provide flagship planning programmes.
- They were not meant to be fully self-standing but instead to provide a subregional urban role because of the quality of public transport to Paris. However, they were meant to be self-sufficient: an employment/population balance was sought.
- In the Greater Paris Area they are located along the main transport corridors (rivers and new motorways) and new leisure areas and green spaces.
- They were not started from scratch but their boundaries were drawn around existing villages.
- They come in all shapes and sizes and there are wide variations in their city plans: some have a clear and identified centre (Evry), others have a decentralised multi-centre structure (Marne). The housing stock and social composition vary a lot from one city to another (social housing percentage is high in Evry, low in Sénart)
- The councils straddled by the new boundaries were forced to set up a syndicate in 1970, then in 1983 to choose between three governing models (new council/syndicates of existing council/merging with existing council) and again in 1999 between keeping a syndicate or becoming a 'communauté d'agglomération'.
- What characterizes them is their experimental dimension in architecture and planning (prefab modules, pedestrian areas, fountains). Architectural competitions were set up for housing (20%). An artist-adviser was attached to each of them.
- 'Starchitecture' was sought (Bofill, Botta, Portzamparc). Public art is widespread.

# Past Assessments

- For a long time, an objective assessment of the NT was difficult to achieve. Why? Because they were a major element in a narrative that sought to glorify the 5th Republic born in 1958 and distance the 5th Republic governments from the post-war 4th. They were described as a flagship achievement. In fact, they have a long history visible in the 1939 Paris region plan and the Courneuve new town project in 1924.
- They came in for criticisms after the late 1980s on the basis of their architecture, location, dormitory dimension.
- A major evaluation exercise was carried out in 1999-2005 when most EPA folded.
- There were some very positive results: they were credited with rebalancing the greater Paris area development away from Paris; their demographic and economic growth was polarised around new growth nodes; they had very good facilities (universities, theatres); they could pride themselves on their good economic record especially in Cergy and Marne; they enjoyed landscaped urban forms, solar panels, electric cars, successful urban place-making. They had helped a rational land use and had stemmed suburbanisation.
- There were negative ones too: they suffered from social and physical problems; their housing stock did not stand the test of time; their image was poor (grand ensembles) and their urban landscape was disappointing as they were too quickly built and the neighbourhood level neglected.
- Today 5/9 have got funding from National Regeneration Agency (ANRU) and many original buildings have been demolished.

# The Paris New Towns event: 19-20 september 2018

- It will not be devoted to one specific city but will have a broader comparative perspective because it will be located in the British Studies Department at Paris 3.
- The speakers will come from a variety of backgrounds: planning specialists/architects/practioners/geographers etc.
- Ther will be one limited case study: Saint Quentin en Yvelines (7 councils straddled).
- Why ? In 2007 it was recognised as Ville d'Art et d'Histoire. It had a Musée de la Ville.
- Some of the questions addressed will revolve around:
  - -What is the physical heritage of new towns in both countries? How is it perceived and construed?
  - -Are some of their original character and design principles under threat?
  - -Who is interested in that heritage?
  - -Can the original governance model , architectural principles be retained and reinstated and could they be applied to current housing developments ?
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