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## **Post-war New Town Heritage – Debates, Tensions and Prospects**

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The heritage of Post War New Towns is of increasing interest to planners, policy makers, historians and heritage and conservation experts. This paper introduces the exploration of what is meant by New Town Heritage and why it has become an important topic for discussion and research at this time.

The New Towns in the UK are a centre-piece of UK post-war planning producing an exceptional architectural and town planning inheritance. They were a direct creation of the post-war welfare state with its focus on housing, health and renewal, but were supported by Governments of all persuasions until the 1980s. They were models of urban living, with a distinctive British take on modernist urban planning and design.

There are two contextual issues that have driven the research agenda outlined below in this paper. First, there is the uncertainty (some would say a crisis) about the role of town planning in a mixed economy society.<sup>1</sup> The second context is the value of modernist town planning, urban design and architecture represented in many of the New Towns.<sup>2</sup> Although Britain was at the forefront in listing post-war modernist heritage - as in the case of designation of Stevenage Town Square Conservation Area in 1988 - it remains an uneasy and contested heritage, which is still seeking acceptance in wider society. It can be argued that post-war New Towns from several points of view belong to underrepresented heritages as discussed by English Heritage (as was) in 2012.<sup>3</sup> The New Towns therefore constitute a town

planning heritage which needs further careful analysis in order to establish its comprehensive value beyond the listing of individual buildings and even specific conservation areas.

The 27 New Towns in the UK created in three waves from 1947 until the late 1960s are an extraordinary urban phenomenon, conceived at a scale almost unimaginable in the present political climate.<sup>4</sup> They set out a spatial vision of healthy communities initially for many thousands decanted from poor housing in inner London, Birmingham and other large cities. They experimented with a range of modernist ideas about urban design, architecture and public art. The New Town idea combined a paternalistic view of how planned environments can offer people a healthy physical, social and economic life, with active encouragement of community spirit in neighbourhoods, clubs and societies from the bottom up.<sup>5</sup>

Post-war modernist heritage has its advocates in national organisations like the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Society and international organisations, such as the International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement. At local level, new town heritage is recognised by present day New Town civic societies, by university planning departments, and by local authorities, for example the University of Hertfordshire Heritage Hub; Harlow Civic Society; MK New Town Heritage Register.

The interest in post-war New Town heritage

is not confined to the UK. Research has been undertaken for the International New Towns Institute by Jaap Jan Berg from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands on the heritage of the Dutch New Towns.<sup>6</sup> Post-war New Towns of the Soviet bloc have received much attention as have inter-war New Towns from Mussolini Italy - many share the search for identity and sustainability under much changed social conditions.

There is renewed interest in the UK New Towns as they reach their 50th or 70th anniversaries, for example, Milton Keynes's 50<sup>th</sup>,<sup>7</sup> Harlow's 70th,<sup>8</sup> and Peterborough's 50th.<sup>9</sup> The New Towns, no longer governed by New Town corporations but by elected local authorities, are commemorating their anniversaries for a variety of reasons. They include seeking to establish and confirm their identity and get in touch with their roots using the anniversaries as place-making measures to make their towns more competitive and cohesive. At the same time, these celebrations are a response to commercial and public pressure, to regenerate parts of the New Town physical inheritance and replace them with more contemporary buildings, housing and public spaces. Nevertheless, first generation New Town local authorities such as Harlow and Stevenage, and even third generation New Towns such as Milton Keynes and Peterborough, are debating how they should adapt or conserve, or, in the case of Bracknell, demolish the original New Town architectural and design legacy in order to be commercially competitive.<sup>10</sup>

This is not a new dilemma for New Town authorities. For example, in Milton Keynes, in 1990 a new shopping centre was approved truncating the iconic Midsummer Boulevard. To this day, it is controversial because it is seen to disrupt the original grid pattern and boulevard design principles of the town. The recent Central Milton Keynes Business Neighbourhood Plan seeks to retain the original grid pattern elsewhere in the face of continued commercial pressures for a flexible approach to preserving the grid.<sup>11</sup>

There is a further reason for the recent interest in New Towns and Garden Cities. The shortage of homes in many parts of the country has encouraged Government to look at Garden Cities and New Towns as potential mechanisms to deliver large numbers of new homes. Organisations such as the TCPA have been actively lobbying for Garden Cities for many years and are now getting a hearing in Government.<sup>12</sup> New settlements like New Towns are also regarded by many planners as an alternative to the perceived design and place-making failure of speculative house-builder-led development of urban extensions in of the last 20 years.<sup>13</sup>

The two contextual issues - the crisis of the UK planning system and ambivalence over the post war modernist legacy - are seen increasingly through the prism of rapid economic and demographic changes that are becoming the defining subject of commentary on the post-war New Towns.

There has always been a turnover of population in towns and cities, but it has been noted that some of the New Towns in the South East and Midlands and in Northern Europe in recent times have experienced a rise in social discord as new populations move in and 'original' residents move out.<sup>14</sup> Places originally created for one class and social grouping are now much more mixed.

In the Netherlands, the leader of the far right party launched his election campaign in a Dutch New Town in 2016. In Harlow, after the European Referendum, hate crimes in the town soared and in August a Polish man was murdered.<sup>15</sup>

The authors of this paper received a grant from the AHRC to establish a New Town Heritage Research Network which explores the New Town Heritage further. The main focus of the network is the town planning and physical inheritance of the post-war New Towns. The built environment and infrastructure with its road patterns, settlement layouts, open spaces, town centres, public and private buildings, and public art reflects the overarching master plans and architectural design of the original New Town corporations. The master plans aimed at an integrated layout, meeting the needs of residents and workers for housing, employment, social and cultural provision in the town. They introduced important strategic principles, notably green corridors, parkways and neighbourhoods (clusters of housing around shops, schools and community facilities). There were detailed design guides for housing

estates and individual buildings, and very extensive tree planting and landscaping beside the roads and paths.<sup>16</sup>

All of this amounts to a distinctive physical inheritance but with wide local differences in design and concept among the 27 UK New Towns.<sup>17</sup> Each town had different architects and designers. Some like Harlow attracted renowned architects (Sir Frederick Gibberd) who brought their own distinctive thinking to New Town design principles. Others like Milton Keynes contracted with large architecture firms and planning consultants. Many like Peterborough had their own large in-house architecture departments as well.

Some of the differences reflect the economic and political context for the first and later generations of New Towns. For example, Harlow and Stevenage were planned for a much more limited use of the motor car compared with Milton Keynes, Peterborough or Northampton whose design principles embraced car travel from the outset. Stevenage built a 23-mile Dutch-style cycle network but in the event it was rarely used as people seem to have found it too easy to drive.<sup>18</sup>

The New Towns have altered and adapted their physical environment in order to respond to commercial pressures and changes in local demands and social trends. Often this adaptation has been difficult and controversial as suggested above. The Town Square in Harlow or the Stevenage shopping precinct, for example, are underused, suffer from some disrepair and are struggling to find a

role as successful public spaces or retail centres. The difficulties of local authorities without the funds to regenerate or refresh are evident.

It is only rarely that towns have managed to restore and re-launch their 1950s or 1960s shopping centres and made them commercially successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the city of Rotterdam has done for their 1960s Lijnbaan centre.

In contrast, house-builders and commercial developers have introduced their own their own house styles and shopping centres that are not usually compatible with the founding New Town design principles.

Change in the governance (ownership, planning and maintenance) of the New Towns has made a very significant impact on local consciousness of the towns as 'New Towns.' In the UK, resourcing and control over the New Towns was transferred from Development Corporations to central Government and local authorities in the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> Local authorities responsible for the former New Towns are no longer receiving income from the land and buildings in their towns. Compared with the Development Corporations, they have more limited resources for upkeep and maintenance of the public realm.

The aim of the network is to explore how New Towns are already seeking to retain some of their original character and design principles and how this can be aided by the conceptualisation and conduction of further research. Is it possible for

local planning authorities to reinstate original master plan principles on layout, landscaping and public facilities? There is scope as in any town for adaptive reuse of buildings or environmental features.<sup>20</sup> Individual buildings such as the distinctive Harlow Railway station or groups of buildings elsewhere or landscapes could be granted listed or conservation area status. It might be possible for local authorities or trusts to reassemble land particularly in the town centres so that it gradually comes under single public or trust ownership, guaranteeing some unified view of design and planning.

Is such a heritage strategy desirable? This question can only be answered on the basis of a careful evaluation of the built environment. Evaluation includes on one hand the application of clear criteria from the instruments of heritage conservation and the expertise of heritage and conservation specialists on form, space and history. On the other hand, it must be based on the discourse with multiple stakeholders and community groups who may or may not identify with the New Town heritage. One of the heritage values in the UK is the communal value. Questions which arise here are: How does a heritage place contribute to the local community? Who is interested in a specific heritage, who benefits from it and why? And who is not and why? Asking these questions and finding answers to them is a step towards trying to develop heritage concepts which foster social integration.<sup>21</sup>

New Town local authorities and civic societies have been active in identifying key

buildings, open spaces or neighbourhoods that they want to protect in some way. The Milton Keynes shopping centre is listed, and the Stevenage shopping centre has been granted Conservation Area status. Doing this leads to further challenges of ensuring productive use of this heritage but it is a statement of intent to value New Town heritage.

The intention of the New Town Heritage Research Network is to build a register of conservation and heritage initiatives for four case study towns (Milton Keynes, Harlow and Peterborough in the UK and Rotterdam's New Towns in the Netherlands) and to create opportunities for comparative national and international analysis and collaborative problem-solving. Each case study will generate a local heritage profile, assessing the approach to heritage, and examining the implications for the future planning and development of the towns. Collectively they are becoming part of a wider network which enables them to not only exchange ideas and approaches, but also develop a shared identity which might emerge. Given the timescale of the AHRC project we hope this to be a fitting contribution to European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018.

## **Conclusion**

New Towns, especially in the UK, are high on the political agenda at the moment because of the celebration of significant anniversaries and the national focus on new settlements to address the housing crisis. There is also a strong historical awareness in the planning and

architecture professions – even a sense of loss – of post-war utopian planning with its comprehensive design and public interest values. In the New Towns, it has left a very distinctive physical inheritance. The task is to evaluate this inheritance using conservation criteria and heritage narratives, using the results to build a foundation for revitalisation and future growth. The challenge is to engage a wide range of stakeholders in the process, to encourage discourse and to try building a broad basis of consensus, from which a distinct identity can emerge. The AHRC New Towns Heritage Network will provide one building block in this process.

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