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The British New Towns: Lessons for the World from the New Town Experiment

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The Place of British New Towns in Global Perspective

For more than a century the idea of building new towns has captured the imagination of urban planners. Britain has been a center of both theory and practice, particularly in the early years of the planned town idea and in the golden period of new town development from the Second World War to the middle of the 1970s (Forsyth and Peiser, 2019a; Wakeman, 2016). While in the last decades of the twentieth century such developments became less common globally, a recent resurgence in activity in Asia, and increasingly elsewhere, has brought new attention to the type. Even the UK has announced a new round of garden-style developments (UK Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, 2018; National Health Service England, 2018).

Though by no means the largest program of new town building globally, twentieth century British new towns were influential far beyond their numbers. They received a great deal of planning and design attention and with multiple sites there was both room for experimentation in development and comparison by visitors. In this article, we ask what is the global legacy of the postwar British new towns? Is there an equivalent set of influential new towns in the current period? In making this argument we draw on a new global inventory of twentieth century new towns as well as the wide literature on the new town experience since 1900.

This knowledge base allows us to argue that globally the legacy has less to do with the details of daily life in any one British new town, or its basic functioning, financial success, social make-up, regional contribution, or enduring design. What is remembered is a fairly coherent program that produced a somewhat varied set of places across multiple phases. Early on there was substantial building so it was possible for visitors to see and evaluate. Planners and designers explained their philosophies to the wider field. Their success was much debated among the public and in scholarly and professional forums. Proponents made strong cases to an international audience. Their failures were inventoried with lessons drawn. Geographical closeness to Europe, and a common professional language with the U.S. and British Commonwealth, allowed this message to spread.

Today it is harder to find an equivalent—Singapore's new towns of the twentieth century have surely influenced China and other parts of Asia. Some ecological new towns have been much publicized but generally slower to construct. The Chinese program of new town development has some exemplars that can certainly be studied. However, the British experience still frames the story of new town planning, particularly where such areas are built as metropolitan satellites rather than freestanding industrial cities. As the new towns age they again have the potential to be leaders in the field of maturation planning, the redevelopment of aging new

towns, though whether they will take that lead is an open question (Forsyth and Pesier, 2019a; Gaborit, 2019).

A Global Inventory

To develop this argument we compiled an inventory of twentieth century new towns, comprehensively planned and fairly self-contained developments built on new land, reaching populations over 30,000 people by 2015 or 2016. We chose this population as a means of distinguishing substantial new towns from neighborhoods and villages and as a way of managing the scope of the project. It also harks back to Howard's classic garden city (Howard, 1898/2003). We are sure this list is incomplete. However, it seemed worthwhile to try to chart out the broad scope of this urban type. Osborn and Whittick's (1963; 1977) classic book had attempted such a list in an earlier period. The International New Towns Institute (2018) has developed a useful online compendium of new towns from all historical periods, though many with little information beyond their name (Tanaka and Forsyth, 2019). We asked experts, searched the internet, and tracked down references in articles and books. We did this in several languages. In addition to the twentieth century list we also did our best to inventory new towns built since 2000 and likely to reach over 30,000 inhabitants (Tanaka and Forsyth, 2019).

Compiling such an inventory raises many questions. Was an area comprehensive enough in land use and planning to be classed as a new town rather than a master planned housing development or an industrial park? Was this an extension of a city or an actual freestanding new town? What were the exact boundaries of the new town within which to measure its current population? When was the start date—these could vary from the start of construction to the move-in date of the first inhabitants? However, given these caveats it paints an interesting picture of the context of the British new towns movement.

Of 533 new towns we identified that were built in the twentieth century, the largest number are in Russia, totaling well over 100; as we note later most of these were variations on the industrial or employment-based town. The United States followed with more than 40; China, India, and the UK had over 30; Singapore and Japan had over 20; France, South Africa, The Netherlands, Egypt, South Korea, and Israel more than 10; and Iran, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Ukraine, Germany, Sweden, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, Poland, and Kazakhstan more than 5. Almost 70 percent were satellite new towns with the remainder freestanding (Tanaka and Forsyth, 2019). The 28 identified in the UK include most of the post war new towns, omitting those that did not reach the population threshold, and also includes Letchworth and Thamesmead (arguably a new town).

In the new century China is dominant but programs to build new cities in India and several African countries mean that the balance of construction may well shift over time.

Table 1. Countries with five or more new town starts by decade

Decade started	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980 ¹	1990	2000
Total new towns	58	114	115	88	26	40	111
Countries 5+ new towns	Russia 14	Russia 28	USA 21	Singapore 10		China 11	China 49
	UK 10	India 11	UK 15	Russia 6		Singapore 5	India 14
	India 6	Israel 11	Russia 9	Japan 6			
		China 10	Japan 8	S. Africa 6			
		USA 7	N'lands 5	USA 5			
			France 5	India 5			
				Egypt 5			
				China 5			

Source: Tanka and Forsyth, 2019.

Notes: Prior to the 1940s there was only one country per decade with 5 or more new towns, Russia. China includes Hong Kong.

New towns are built for a number of purposes. Over half the twentieth century new towns were built to house employees in industries such as resource extraction or those working in the military on research. Often isolated, they needed to have a mixture of activities. Over two-thirds of such new towns were built in Russia, the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, China, and India. Another large group, almost 40 percent, were built to deconcentrate metropolitan areas, aiming to help cities grow in a thoughtful and balanced way. The remaining 10 percent included planned capitals, reconstruction after wars, and resettlement (mostly in Israel and South Asia). In the current century, the mix has remained largely the same perhaps with a slight tilt toward metropolitan deconcentration (Forsyth and Peiser 2019a).

The British Experiment

British new towns fit into this history in a unique way. They were pioneers in early company town experiments in the nineteenth century from Saltaire to Port Sunlight and Bourneville (Hall and Ward, 2014). They led theory and broad activism at the turn of the twentieth century with the garden city idea and its early built demonstration in Letchworth and later in Welwyn (Howard, 1898/2003; Clapson 2017). After the Second World War, they were the first to launch a complete program of new towns.

The initial impetus for these government-sponsored new towns after World War II was to provide housing for the millions of returning veterans, and to replace housing lost from bombing during the war. In addition to providing new housing, the new towns were intended to assist with deconcentration of population and reduce congestion in London and other major cities (Clapson, 2017). When it was wound up in 1996 with the transfer of undeveloped land in the new towns to the New Towns Commission, they had achieved a substantial population. As Wannop describes “One in 25 of all dwellings constructed in the UK between 1945 and 1995 were built in 32 new towns developed by government agencies” (Wannop, 1999, 213; Hall, 1989).

This was a large and ambitious program in multiple locations, though looking from a global perspective certainly not the largest or fastest growing. Russia built many more new towns. It took 50 years for the population of 32¹ new towns in the UK to grow by 1.4 million. By comparison, the seven new towns in the New Territories of Hong Kong took only ten years to grow as much (Wannop, 1999, p 229; Yeh, 2019).

From early on they alternated praise and criticism (Aldridge, 1979; Oxford Brookes, 2006; Karimi and Vaughan 2014; Clapson, 2017). Proponents pointed out that they solved a number of important problems, shifting populations to better serviced locations and fostering economic development. Given problems with housing and transport in core areas they were an efficient means to suburbanize while also testing new planning and design approaches, including new ways to provide better environments for the working class and designs that fostered both mobility and pedestrian safety (Clapson, 2017). They were well placed to provide the kinds of infrastructures needed by emerging industrial sectors; new towns attracted more than 50% of the high-tech employment during the 1980s (Begg, 1991, 968). Physical living standards—roads, houses, open space, and public infrastructure—were higher than that achieved in either council housing alone or in private areas of new development (Wannop, 1999, 229).

But critics could point to numerous ways in which they did not achieve their goals, or where the goals themselves were problematic. They were difficult to develop. People did not always want to move to them. The social and economic mix could be sub-optimal—veering toward too much of one group, often residents of council housing (Peiser and Chang, 1999; Clapson, 2017). They suffered from social problems related to placing a large number of new residents in one area, particularly when services lagged. Growth in employment often trailed behind growth in residences, so one of the new towns’ principal goals—self-containment—was difficult to achieve. Some relied too heavily on one industry. Alternatives to the car were not always well developed. Design could be bland; design innovations such as megastructures were often unsuccessful. Governance was frequently not developed enough to manage these deficits. Poor progress in urban renewal and social problems in inner cities brought a new skepticism about their prospects from the Labour government in the mid-1970s (Wannop, 1999, 218-222; Clapson 2017).

¹ This number includes those that did not reach the 30,000 threshold.

Such a list of benefits and problems could be said of many new town programs (Freestone, 2019; Forsyth, 2019). However, the British new town experience was particularly well documented and well publicized. From a global perspective, however, they formed a coherent body of work that evolved over time, thus demonstrating useful variation for those wanting to see options.

The Current Period

We located almost 150 new towns under way since 2000 and likely to reach at least 30,000 people, many much more. This is necessarily a more preliminary list with more uncertainty. Some are large, instant new towns, often developed without the careful planning and design attention of the best of the twentieth century developments. In Africa, India, and some other locations, employment-led new towns are struggling to balance jobs with housing for a broad public (Keeton and Provoost, 2019, Balakrishnan, 2019). However, it is undeniable that relatively large, comprehensively planned, mixed use, freestanding developments are being built in substantial numbers in the current period.

Of course real questions can be asked about whether this current generation of new developments represents the best of new town planning. In China much of the current development of new towns is routine—a broad framework set by the local government into which private developers insert superblocks based on fairly standard formulas and largely separated by income and tenure (Kan et al., 2017; Rowe et al., 2018). Some are strategically linked to new employment centers but others are developed in a more ad hoc manner. There is not a real program as such and there has been relatively little systematic evaluation. Where they have been evaluated, this has typically been at the scale of the neighborhood rather than the new town as a whole. In this it is perhaps more similar to Russia in the twentieth century where there was a large number of industrial towns, and their influence was within the socialist realm, mainly to China and India.

There are, however, new town exemplars in China. Shanghai's one city, nine towns plan invested substantial planning and design attention into a series of satellite new towns that are among the most widely discussed of those in China (Wu, 2019). The Sino-Singapore Eco-City, set in the middle of the low elevation zone near Tianjin, has progressed and draws on the experience of another great new town program of the twentieth century, that of Singapore (Rowe, 2019). Liangzhu, located in the hills outside of Hangzhou, adapted a garden-style, naturalistic approach to Chinese conditions, with a broad diversity of building typologies and heights and mixed-use development in a lower density condition than is common in China (Guan et al., 2019). Among the many very large affordable housing developments in China—numbering tens of thousands of residents or more—many are pleasant places to live with adequate services, certainly comparable to parts of the British new town program though at a much higher density (Rowe et al., 2016).

China's new towns do face a new set of problems, particularly around redevelopment—the fast pace of construction means many have aged quickly. Will they look to Britain for examples of maturation planning, involving the public and governments in a participatory way, or to

Singapore which is physically more similar and governmentally more unified? Singapore's urban development agency is also proactive about providing information to others, enabling transfer of ideas. There is no similar body in Britain although the Town and Country Planning Association remains active in this area (TCPA, 2018).

Beyond the issue of redeveloping earlier new towns—incrementally developed and instant—three other emerging issues may promote new town planning in the coming century (Peiser and Forsyth, 2019b). One is the need for resettlement related to climate change and other disasters (Godschalk, 2019). Something that seemed a distant likelihood even a decade ago is becoming more and more pressing, particularly for smaller settlements that are expensive to protect. The smaller new towns, and programs of healthy new town style neighborhoods, urban extensions, and brownfield redevelopments that are popping up in the UK again, may provide models if they manage not to merely promote sprawl (Clapson, 2017; UK Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, 2018; National Health Service England, 2018).

The second direction is the need for housing large numbers of people with dignity. The new town pattern of developing infrastructure in a comprehensive way could be paired with some version of the sites and services model, to provide a higher quality environment at a lower cost than providing finished housing. Finally, a lack of developable land in many locations may well make the comprehensive approach of new towns more appealing.

The active development of the British New Towns Corporations was shut down and transferred to the New Towns Commission in the 1990s, primarily responsible for selling off the remaining assets of the new towns. However, the twentieth century British new towns remain exemplars for the twenty-first century. In this century, when new towns will continue to play important roles in providing new homes and workplaces for growing populations and as laboratories for testing new urban theories, the early British example of easy access for visitors to built towns, and very public discussion about strengths and weaknesses, remains a model to emulate.

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