Lessons from the British and French New Towns

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Lessons from the British and French New Towns: Paradise Lost?

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Lessons from British and French New Towns: Paradise Lost?

David Fee, Sabine Coady Schäbitz and Bob Colenutt

The British and French New Towns in History

For centuries, creating new communities and building new settlements has been one of humankind's main activities as it spreads around the globe. Whether it was the Greeks around the Mediterranean, the Romans in wider Europe, the Mayas in Yucatan or the Chinese in Far East Asia, all civilisations have been busy laying out new cities as they extended the borders of the territories under their command. These new cities have been the outcome of two very different motivations. On the one hand, a practical one: New Towns and cities like most North American ones were created as a result of human migration to unchartered territories in order to accommodate new settlements and activities. They stand in sharp contrast to another category of new cities created as a political statement to exemplify the power wielded by a specific ruler, such as Versailles, Saint Petersburgh, Kyoto or New Delhi.

The French and British New Towns (we shall focus our study in this book on these two countries) are of a third kind. They were created in a deliberate attempt to redistribute the country's population away from the capital city and the largest urban areas (Forsyth & Peiser, 2019) in order to reorganise the economic and demographic development of the nation. Besides, despite their name, they were rarely built from scratch but around existing small settlements of various sizes instead.

In Britain, the New Towns programme finds its origins in the interwar work of the Greater London Regional Planning Committee set up in 1927 by Neville Chamberlain, the then Minister of Health (Cherry, 1988). The committee was helped by Raymond Unwin, the architect of Letchworth Garden City. It published three reports in 1929, 1931 and 1931, putting forward proposals for the reorganisation of the London region and the creation of satellite towns. This decentralist view was restated in the 1940 Barlow report that recommended redistributing population and industry away from large industrial cities for health and safety reasons. These plans fed into the 1944 Abercrombie Greater London Plan commissioned by Lord Reith that took up the concepts of four decreasing density rings in the London region and satellite towns beyond the fourth. After the end of the Second World War, and after the 1945 general election, Lewis Silkin, the then Minister of Town and Country Planning, set up a departmental committee

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that produced three reports on future New Towns leading to the passing of the 1946 New Towns Act. The 32 British New Towns were built in three waves, first from 1946 to 1950 when most of the London overspill towns were started, second in the early 1960s when most of the provincial ones were launched and third between 1965 and 1970 when the last two and largest ones were designated.

The French New Towns (*Villes Nouvelles*), although they were established much later, find their origins in the interwar years, too. A first step was taken in 1904 when a French Garden City association was set up, under the influence of the British Garden City Movement. Following the 1919 Cordunet Act on town extension and improvement, the man in charge of housing for the Seine département around Paris, Henri Sellier, asked the local housing associations (sociétés HBM or low cost housing) to come up with a plan to build new settlements in greater Paris in order to decongest the central area. This request led to the 1933 HBM garden suburbs plan for Greater Paris that saw 15 garden suburbs (misleadingly named Garden Cities) being built. At the same time, the notion of regional planning was given a further boost when the government set up a planning and reorganisation committee for the Greater Paris area in 1928. An Act ensued in 1932 and a Greater Paris plan was published in 1939 but they came to nothing as the second war loomed and were abandoned after the war (Merlin, 1991, p. 31).

The French New Towns programme was finally launched during a period of political upheaval and administrative reform. In 1958, the French Fifth Republic was born, out of the Algerian war crisis, and its birth was followed by a raft of administrative measures that were designed to overhaul the governance of France and break with the past (Vaderlorge, 2014). These included measures to reform town and country planning, rebalance the economic and demographic development of France, organise and control the development of urban areas. After 1963, the Fifth Republic governments were also determined to move away from the failed planning experiment of the Grands Ensembles, those high-rise council estates built on the peripheries of French cities from the mid-1950s on (Vaderlorge, 2014). The greater Paris area was the object of the then government's attention as it had grown rapidly in a haphazard way, and lacked adequate infrastructure despite the 1920s and 1930s attempts to plan its development. It was overly dominated by the urban core of the city of Paris and its closer suburbs. The five Greater Paris New Towns were designated as of 1966. In parallel, in the provinces, similar regional spatial strategies were elaborated after 1965 and four of them included the creation of a New Town (near Lille, Rouen, Lyon and Marseille) in order to reorganise the local urban areas.

French and British New Towns share a number of features, owing to the fact that French policymakers had time to examine and draw lessons from the earlier New Towns experiment across the Channel. In both countries, the development process was entrusted to a special vehicle specifically created to develop the New Towns (a public corporation in the UK and a *Etablissement Public d'Aménagement* or EPA in France) and funded by the government. A central directorate in government was in charge of supervising the programme. Both vehicles were given wide powers including planning and compulsory purchase powers, as well as development powers for a mix of housing, offices, community facilities, industry, open

spaces and transport. In both countries, the specially appointed vehicles were abolished in the 1990s and by then they had been successful at attracting population and jobs. They also provided fertile ground for public art experiments (see chapter by Congreve). Finally, in both countries the onus was placed on incorporating the natural environment (topography, forests, lakes, and rivers) into the master plans and integrating the landscape into the New Towns. Governments in the UK and France commissioned famous international architects, as well as contemporary artists to create the master plans (Chaline, 1985, p. 93; Manley, 2018).

However, the French and British New Towns display a number of differences too (beyond their difference in numbers). In the UK, they were positioned so as to be self-standing as well as achieve a work/housing balance, which they rarely did (Oxford Brookes University, Department of Planning, 2006, p. 61), while in France they were built on the edge of the selected urban areas so as to benefit from existing transport corridors and enable commuting. In the British New Towns, the neighbourhood concept remained an overarching principle while it gradually became secondary in France as more blocks of flats were built. French New Towns included universities in the original master plans while in the UK the absence of universities or higher education establishments in the New Towns has remained a distinct drawback.

From Cutting-Edge Experiments to Fraught Legacy

For several decades after the designation of the last New Town in each country (Central Lancashire City in 1970 in the UK and Sénart in 1973 in France), building new settlements slipped down the government agenda. Government in the UK turned its attention away from dispersal and new settlements to the growing problems of the inner cities. Money and policy focused on urban renewal and regeneration not on the creation of more New Towns. In France, because New Town development started later than in the UK, the government concentrated on completing them (two are still being built in 2020) and then transferred their ownership to local government. They only benefited from renewed government attention in the early 2000s when some of their neighbourhoods were included in national urban renewal programmes.

Nevertheless, national authorities in both countries were interested in learning from the New Towns experiment and commissioned an assessment of the legacy of the programmes at fairly similar dates. In the UK, following the transfer of responsibilities from the Commission for the New Towns (itself the successor to the New Towns corporations abolished by 1992) to English Partnerships in 1999, the House of Commons' Transport, Local Government and Regions Committee (2002) published a report on the state of the New Towns in 2002. While it recognised that many New Towns were economically dynamic and had helped provide good housing to the many, it denounced the various problems experienced by most New Towns: their design was said to be inappropriate, their infrastructures were described as ageing and many were said to be suffering from social and economic problems. The committee was scathing about the asset disposal policy followed by successive governments, the lack of adequate investment

to help regenerate the New Towns and replace non-traditional construction material. In sum, it concluded that government policy displayed a glaring strategic void and blamed the previous conservative governments for having brought to an end the New Town planning experiment. Above all, it underlined that no official assessment had ever taken place before its own report. This lack of 'research based material', especially after 1979, was further underlined four years later by the Oxford Brookes University team commissioned by the government in order to determine the lessons from the New Towns that could be transferred to the 2003 Growth Areas policy (Oxford Brookes University, Department of Planning, 2006). The Oxford Brookes report also highlighted the limited number of studies based on the views of the New Towns' residents.

In France, although there were academic studies conducted on the New Towns as early as 1969, the French national authorities only attempted to assess the outcomes of the New Towns public policy 30 years after their creation, when some EPA had already folded. At the request of then Prime minister, Lionel Jospin, in a context of regional devolution, a commission was set up under the chairmanship of Jean Eudes Roullier. It reported in 2005 and found some very positive outcomes. In particular, it highlighted their ability to attract a sizeable share of the demographic growth of the neighbouring urban areas, although their growth was mostly due to natural increase and a younger population. In the greater Paris area, they had fulfilled the ambition of the planners: they had become proper urban growth nodes in the outer ring of the region and provided residents with homes, facilities, jobs, commercial facilities and more recently four new universities. Above all, they were praised for their excellent transport infrastructures (as in Marne-la-Vallée, the European base of the Disney Company). Their economic record was deemed to be good although 6 out of 10 jobs were taken up by nearby commuters. They were thought to be a good example of innovative planning on the basis of their architectural experiments, landscaped urban forms or the use of electric cars, solar panels, rainwater collection, etc. On the downside, the report noted that some neighbourhoods were caught up in a downward spiral and were already suffering from the same social and physical problems as the large 1960s high-rise estates (*Grands Ensembles*) (Ministère des Transports, 2005).

In both countries, New Towns have undergone physical changes since their creation and have had to adapt to changing financial and social circumstances. As underlined by the above-mentioned House of Commons and DCLG reports, in the UK, public pressures for the redevelopment of some of their estates and alteration of their original master plan have grown. This has led for instance to the demolition and redevelopment of the Southgate estate in Runcorn as residents were not happy with its experimental architecture (Oxford Brookes University, Department of Planning, 2006) In Bracknell, where the council had identified a major loss of income due to the design of the town centre and more specifically its shopping centre (not to mention the more recent competition from a very large shopping centre in Reading), the town centre was demolished and rebuilt following a £240 million programme between 2012 and 2017. A similar major redevelopment of a New Town centre has been underway for some years in Basildon. In France, in Evry, the iconic Pyramides neighbourhood was redeveloped as

of 2006 in order to open it up to the rest of the town, change its road pattern and demolish some of the original buildings along with the raised pedestrian areas. In Cergy, the redevelopment of the town centre was about to be launched at the time of writing, following the sale of the old shopping centre to a private developer. The purpose is to reduce the level of car dependence and alter the grid pattern.

Renewing the New Towns Experiment?

These alterations have stirred a debate about the legacy of the New Towns as well as the conservation of the original town plans and buildings. Milton Keynes, after allowing in 1990 a new shopping centre to be built on Midsummer Boulevard is today showing more concern for the original grid pattern in its MK Business Neighbourhood Plan (see chapter by Sabine Coady Schaebitz). Stevenage's town centre has been granted conservation status and New Towns civic societies have been created. In France, Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (SQY) was awarded in 2007 the prestigious label *ville d'art et d'histoire* (city of art and history) with regard to its twentieth-century heritage, in spite of the lack of interest by local politicians.

This renewed interest in the UK and France in the planning principles and inheritance of the New Towns (and their Garden City predecessors) comes in a context of growing housing crisis on both sides of the Channel. Following the publication of *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future* in 2003 by the then Labour government and the announcement that four growth areas had been designated to accommodate 200,000 extra homes, the government looked to the New Town experiment for lessons and commissioned a report (see above). More recently, in 2014, successive governments published *Locally-Led Garden Cities,* followed two years later by *Locally-Led Garden Villages, Towns and Cities* (DCLG, 2016). In these documents, government encouraged local authorities in the south east to come forward with Garden City projects that rallied local residents (see chapter by Warwick).

In France, the on-going expansions of Massy and Marne-La-Vallée in Greater Paris testify to the enduring appeal of state-planned communities and recent exhibitions like *Les cités-jardins d'Ile-de-France: une certaine idée du bonheur*, in Suresnes (Greater Paris) in 2018 are an indication of a renewed interest for the history and legacy of new settlements experiments in general. However, contrary to the UK, there has been no official expression of interest in the creation of further New Towns for a variety of reasons explained in this book (see chapter by Fée).

The UK renewed interest comes in a very different intellectual and ideological context to the post-war one that presided over the creation of New Towns. The New Towns were launched at a time when the government-led model was dominant in the town and country planning systems of both countries and the broader British and French society, too. In the UK, the wartime extension of state intervention and planning that was designed to ensure the survival of the nation was carried over after 1945. There was a consensus among the political elite that the reconstruction of the country required 'to manage inputs and deliver services' (Stoker, 2004, p. 11) on a universal basis and organise a modern society.

The legitimacy of this model rested on the principle that citizens controlled elected politicians and politicians controlled officials and experts employed by government and government agencies. It was to be hierarchical, rule-driven and effective (Stoker, 2004, pp. 16–17). Within this model, town planners enjoyed a good public image as they were the ones entrusted with building a better Britain (Cullingworth, 2006, p. 431). Their activity was construed as a rational and scientific one). In France, the rebuilding of the country took place along similar lines, with state planning being seen as key to ensuring the economic and social recovery of the nation. After 1958, the traditional bureaucratic top-down approach was further strengthened and the *préfets* (the appointed representatives of the central government in the regions and *départements*) given more power over town and country planning at the expenses of towns and cities (Vaderlorge, 2014, pp. 97–106).

Today, in the UK, planning is carried out in a post-Thatcherite context characterised by a market-oriented approach. Planning regulations and tools have been streamlined (despite an attempt during the New Labour years to revive regional planning) as evidenced as early as 1985 with the White Paper *Lifting the Burden* and more recently by the *National Planning Policy Framework* 2012 and its 'presumption in favour of sustainable development'. Its overall objective has shifted from tackling social exclusion and inequalities (again with an exception during the New Labour years with the Social Exclusion Unit) to upholding economic growth primarily as shown by the publication of *Unlocking Growth in Cities* in 2011. Fostering growth coalitions has become a key objective of successive governments since the late 1970s and partnership working, first encouraged under the John Major governments (Rydin, 1998, p. 77) has become the norm as evidenced by the post-2010 requirement to set up Local Enterprise Partnerships. Planning has also had to reckon with a new localism agenda officialised by the Localism Act 2011 that has sought to transfer more power to residents and has led to a reorganisation of the governance of the country with new combined authorities being given new planning powers following the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. Above all, post-2010 planning has taken place in a context of austerity measures which has led to planning departments being cut back in size and sometimes closed down altogether in a repeat of the privatisation drive that occurred in the Thatcher years (Rydin, 1998, p. 62). Finally, today's planning is premised on a new driver of urban planning and design, the desire for sustainability.

In France, the public sector has remained stronger and planning has not been affected to the same extent by pro-market political ideologies that favour private rather than public-sector approaches. A key theme has been devolution: since the 1980s all governments have sought to devolve planning powers to the local level (see chapter by Fée) and this common political agenda has transformed planning policies in France. The general and national interest has been superseded by local interests and top-down national planning operations, such as the 66 competitiveness nodes (*pôles de compétitivité*) established in 2006 have become rare (Merlin, 61). Further, as of 2014, 21 provincial authorities (*métropoles*) have been created and new planning powers devolved, with Paris, Lyon and Marseille enjoying a specific

administrative status. Another theme has been urban renewal with the decision in 2003 to launch a national programme of neighbourhood renewal (*Programme national de renovation urbaine*) and to renew it in 2014 under the LAMY Act.

All this accounts for the dominant role played by the private sector in the new settlements being built in the UK (see chapter by Warwick). Whereas the New Towns were the brainchild of the successive post-war UK governments, new settlements are being designed and built by private developers within the framework of a local development plan prepared by the local authority. While private applications for new settlements such as Stone Bassett or Tillingham Hall were rejected in the 1980s (Fée, 2003, p. 27) and came to nothing, the private sector is behind current attempts to build a New Town at Ebbsfleet (see chapter by Warwick) and the expansion of Bicester (a former ecotown). This means that contemporary attempts at reviving the New Towns experiment are bound to be based on different principles and vehicles to the original ones. In France, if additional New Towns are no longer on the agenda, local authorities remain very much involved in the building of urban extensions, be it as planners or as builders of council homes and landlords (see chapter by Fée).

Purpose of the Book

These developments account for our decision to gather this collection of comparative essays. The title of the book – Paradise Lost with a question mark – reflects the fact that the New Town story in both countries is contested and any conclusion about their success or failure remains open because the towns continue to change and evolve. At the same time, any conclusions reflect different standpoints – those of residents, planners, and politicians, for example. In some ways comparing UK and French New Town systems creates a further complicating factor because New Towns in the UK and France have grown out of different political systems and practices of urban development and planning. Yet they have much in common.

They share a common context in terms of the role of the national state in tackling urgent problems of housing and urban growth and in promoting innovative design and architecture. Both New Town programmes demonstrate the commitment of governments in the post-war years to shape the spatial and architectural pattern of urbanisation within a broadly welfare state context and provide an ideal living environment for the population (hence the term 'paradise' in the title of this book). Although the UK New Towns programme in particular went further than this into the restructuring of declining regions, the main focus of both New Town systems was the accommodation and decentralisation of growth in the capital cities and major regional cities.

Looking at the New Towns that are now reaching maturity provides an insight into the success or otherwise of the national and local spatial planning and design concepts that underlie these settlements in France and the UK. They allow us to compare these towns in terms of the quality of the built environment – especially the innovative built heritage of the New Towns. But at the same time, they also enable us to explore the non-material factors which are part of the DNA of New Towns in particular the social values underlying the planning of the UK and

French New Towns as well as their residents' perceptions. Comparing the French and UK experiments, two of Europe's major New Towns programmes, will allow us to answer a number of key questions: What were the planners trying to achieve in terms of urban living and citizenship and how has this translated? How far have New Towns moved from the initial goals? What unexpected problems have the programmes met with 70 to 40 years on? To what extent did New Town planners in the two countries share concepts and experiences? Finally, do they provide an inspiration for contemporary new settlements? As seen through this collection of essays, we think their legacy provides lessons for the present – for the renewal and regeneration of existing New Towns, for planning for the next generation of New Towns and more generally for debates on urban planning.

This book is the product of a collaboration that originated in 2017. That year, a New Town Heritage Research Network funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Council was formed to bring together New Town researchers in universities and civic society organisation in the UK and Europe. The timing was significant because several New Towns in the UK and Europe were celebrating anniversaries of 50 or 70 years since their founding and there was renewed public and policy interest in the New Town model of town planning and housing development as explained previously (Colenutt & Coady Schaebitz, 2020).

The focus of the Network was initially on the heritage and legacy of the New Towns but later expanded into a more general evaluation of New Town programmes in the UK and in Europe, mainly in the Netherlands and France. A number of inter-disciplinary seminars were held in UK and European New Towns exploring the origins and legacies of these New Towns. One of these seminars took place at the University of Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle in 2018 specifically to compare the UK and French New Town programmes and take stock of the recent developments mentioned above.

This book also aims to complement a number of books on the topic of New Towns. It does not only adopt a retrospective and historical approach like most early books such as Frank Schaffer's (1969) *The New Town Story* (published as an insider's and Secretary of the Commission for the New Town's account) and Stephen Ward's (2016) *Peaceful Path: Building Garden Cities and New Towns*, but also seeks to assess the modern legacy of UK New Towns and their influence on current experiments and debates, too. Like Anthony Alexander (2009), it attempts to draw lessons from the New Towns programme. However, it does not examine the challenges and opportunities facing the British New Towns from the perspective of sustainability. Indeed, Alexander's master study was published 11 years ago at the time of New Labour's Sustainable Communities and eco-towns programmes and was very much influenced by the rise of the environmental agenda at the UK level.

As said above, our approach is a comparative one as we seek to compare and contrast New Towns in France and the UK. As such, it provides a cross-Channel analysis that aims to add to previous comparative studies like Pascaline Gaborit (2014). In this collective work, Gaborit and her co-authors, like Alexander, examined the issue of urban sustainability, albeit from a wider, mostly Far East Asian, perspective (and to a much smaller extent a European one).