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Utopia Incomplete: British New Towns and Craigavon.

*'It's hard to imagine, that nothing at all  
Could be so exciting and so much fun.  
Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens.'*

Heaven by Talking Heads 1979.

The New towns initiative in the UK and Northern Ireland, enshrined in the Act of 1946, was derived out of a stream of philosophical thought that was a reaction to modernity, particularly Victorian industrialisation. This was developed through the writings of Ruskin and Morris and crystallised by Ebenezer Howard in his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, which culminated with the design of Letchworth by Parker and Unwin (completed 1914). Letchworth however, was a more than just a physical and spatial entity: it was actually a policyscape, a novel economic and social policy landscape that regulated development in a modern and scientific way.

These themes of the scientification of urban design, and the regulation of urban development through policy, run through the whole New Town movement, right up to the development of the eco-towns of today. New Towns, in fact, can be seen as an embodiment of modernity, as well as a reaction to it.

From the movement's ambivalent beginnings in its reaction to the industrialised city, and its engagement with design and control through regulation and structure, the New Town has celebrated a particular British aesthetic, one of domesticity; modesty and quiet efficiency. Yet on the other hand New Towns also celebrate the abstract nature of the modernism of 'Le Modulor' and its ideas of the generic and the regulated, right through to the conflicting user experience of total space, where nothing is left to chance, except the promotion of alienation and banality.

This idea of 'engineered' space, rather than planned or emergent space has led to the creation of unusual and unique urban conditions. Engineered space has at its core the idea of efficiency and the measured: designed or emergent space, on the other hand, is about effectiveness and often the unmeasurable. This is the problem of the New Town, but also its joy: we can only engineer what we can measure, and in the city we can never measure enough. Because it was obvious and could be measured, early modernity looked particularly at mobility as the measurable driver of urbanism. Mobility (seen as traffic) could be counted, modeled, regulated and used to shape the city.

Thus as befits its century, the New Town movement was a celebration of motorised transport and each type of town plan (there were 3 waves) engaged with mobility in different ways and made new urban forms out of these engagements.

As stated above, the forerunner of the New Town was Parker and Unwin's Letchworth, built from 1909 to 1919. The town was derived from an idea that the city could be a corporation, and more than this, a business. Once the city was seen

as a business, it could then be managed using theories of scientific management, which were in vogue: everything would be measured, optimised and controlled, and things would be done efficiently. This efficiency was manifest in an obsession with traffic flow and congestion, the study of which invented the Roundabout as a new urban form. The roundabout was based on the design of mechanised factory production lines like those for filling milk bottles or making chocolate bars. At the time it was a very radical move and even today the otherworldliness of this first roundabout is celebrated in cinema in Simon Pegg's zombie apocalypse 'The Worlds End' (2013).

During the Second World War, there was much contemplation by architects about urban renewal. Bombing had seriously damaged cities and there was finally a chance for radical change. Much of this change was focused on new and better ways of living (such as the Manchester Plan 1945), and new ways of mobility and slum clearance were to be the drivers of this change. Car (and bus) usage had grown rapidly between the Wars and cities were near breaking point with traffic.

The first New Towns (Type 1) obsessed about the car. Extrapolations of car-usage into the future created terrifying clogged futures for cities. The Abercrombie Plan of 1945 suggested a ring of new towns around London to deal with the problem of congestion. Stevenage, the first of these, looked to solve the problem of the car before it happened. In order to do this its designers looked to Europe for answers: in Rotterdam the Lijnbaan, a traffic-free shopping centre had been designed. Stevenage was to get one too. In the socialist rapture of the post-war world, Labour Minister Lewis Silkin appointed a radical town-planner Dr Monica Felton to oversee (Felton was later sacked for supporting Russia in the Korean War and received the Stalin Peace Medal!) . The town was for a time known as Silkingrad due to the socialistic principles than generated its form. Later in the 1960s the vacuous town would be celebrated in the film 'Here we go round the Mulberry Bush' a pathetic romcom about the banality of life stuck in a small town, whilst London was swinging. In an ironic twist, the theme song of the film was performed by the band Traffic.

Later New Towns (Type 2) separated further the car from the person. Based on Colin Buchanan's seminal *Traffic in Towns*, Runcorn completes the evolution of traffic-free shopping by replacing the town centre with an indoor shopping mall and car park. The shopping mall becomes the new materialistic hub of the town, and is placed at the centre of a partly elevated, figure-of-eight urban expressway for buses. The boredom of living in a place with no real public realm is celebrated in the surreal and hyper-localised 2001-11 BBC TV sitcom "Two pints of lager and a packet of crisps".

The Scottish New Town of Cumbernauld takes the centrist idea to the limit by placing all the shopping and administrative functions of the town in a huge cantilevering megastructure. The town also has complete grade-separation, meaning pedestrians and cars were kept totally apart, on different networks. The town was designed by Geoffrey Copcutt who later went on to design Craigavon, and is celebrated in the 1980s Bill Forsyth film about small-time, dumb teenage romance, Gregory's Girl.

The New Town movement reached a pinnacle in the late 1970's with the Type 3 towns. Milton Keynes shies away from the problems created by the centrist and grade-separatist ideas of the earlier towns, and creates the exact opposite: non-hierarchical planning around a gridded urban form, with copious roundabouts. The town has an ambivalent relationship with its surroundings – and being low density there is a large amount of grass-land, its redundancy famously celebrated by the installation of life-size, concrete cows. The town too is celebrated in film: in *Superman IV* its railway station is mocked up as the United Nations Headquarters where our superhero addresses the Council.

Rather like the figure-of-eight busway in Runcorn, this brings us in a roundabout way to Craigavon. Designed by Geoffrey Copcutt after Cumbernauld, Craigavon has another interesting traffic-orientated form: that of a linear city joined by a motorway. This ex-urbs form is a precursor to that which is now dominating the U.S.A around places like Tyson's Corner, but theirs, unlike ours, is emergent and unplanned. Craigavon is different in that the intensity that creates the American ex-urbs is not present; in the polite, diffuse urbanism of Craigavon nothing really sparks. The town once again is celebrated in celluloid, this time in the gritty 2008 film *Peacefire*, an urban noir film about car stealing, police-informants, loyalty and family history.

In the end, the New Town movement was considered a marginal success; yes the towns were occupied, but often in spite of the engineered landscape, rather than because of it. *People* live and dwell, and *they* make things work, urbanists need to remember that. Many think these new towns seem banal because they are without a history, but that is not the case: they are banal because a life engineered is banal. This is because it is the rough edges of things that make them interesting and personal, and in these towns all the rough edges have all been engineered out. The towns are immortalized in films partly due to the otherworldliness caused by this erasure, but also because of their perfect embodiment of a banality that is everyday life.

Unfortunately we have learned precious little from the experience, worse places are still being built, Poundbury in Dorset championed by Prince Charles is one: a place where extreme aesthetic control of your neighbour's house and garden (and even leisure-time – caravans are banned) replaces normal societal structures, and the new eco-towns like Bicester, where the only concession to the eco is the replacement of the garden wall with the hedge.

So when next you're in Craigavon, enjoy it for what it is: a utopia incomplete. In that regard it's so much better than the new estates that are popping up all over these Islands, because it was designed with an ethos about living in the future: it just happens to be a shame that the future it was designed for never happened. And, as Theo Crosby later pointed out, 'Grass is the enemy of cities'.

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Belfast. March 2015.

### **Further reading**

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