In search of the new: The hidden heritage of Britain's new towns

The Planner essay

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The idealistic impulse of the 'new town' is being lost as time takes its toll and memories fade. Researcher Su Fitzpatrick is dedicated to recalling and preserving its original spirit, while ringing the changes of a great social and planning experiment

Crawley then and now — (c) Jeff Pitcher

The new towns of Britain are now between 54 and 76 years old. They are typically framed in terms of their origins as 'utopian experiments' of the post-war managerial state, and the word 'failed' often follows an quite closely behind a fair number – particularly in the North.

Archival images of the new towns' pristine, as yet unlived-in landscapes do tend to make a jarring comparison with photos of the same landscapes today. My foray into curating a photographic exhibition for the 50th anniversary of Warrington New Town expansion in 2018 revealed some depressing land use change, such as small play areas in residential closes giving way to car parking spaces.

In so many of the new towns, you can point to the way the original design principles have succumbed to neglect. Concrete has weathered, the underpasses are scary, buses now bypass the busways, shopping centres (or 'town centres' as they were called in Runcorn and Cumbernauld) have units to let, leisure facilities have long since packed up, the experimental and the mundane alike have been demolished – sometimes to make way for something mundane in a more contemporary style, sometimes just to make way for empty space.

In knowing the new town, we often refer to the utopian thinking that birthed them. But utopias are 'no places'; they are always imaginary and impossible to realise. The point was, at one time in our history an ideal existed – to create greener, more spacious, more prosperous places for all social classes to live in together.

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Looking back from the present, these ideals are judged with a degree of respect, even collective pride, by residents of new towns in what their original planners were trying to achieve. However, a sense that the new towns were 'too planned' abides; that they curtail spontaneity, they are uniform, that the planners' desires for the order of work, leisure, exercise, shopping, and the pathways and roads to access all of those things, the endless convenience of it all, can't possibly capture the way everyone else wishes to live, or indeed will to live.

The important stuff of place, like history and culture is weirdly absent. This is translated into discourses of failure, but other more generative, critical, and possibly more hopeful ways of knowing the new towns of the UK do exist. They involve taking the residents' lived experience as the key that unlocks the complexities, contradictions and nuances of what these places mean in the 21st century.

Rather than thinking about a particular new town as failing to live up to the imagined future of planners and architects past, let us instead look to the stories of the residents. Accounts of the lived experience of the new town intersect landscape design and architecture with the changing role of the state, the effects of the post-financial-crisis austerity agenda upon landscape maintenance, changing family lives, changing working lives, nostalgia, sense of place, the housing crisis, and on and on.

Alternative histories

Over the past six years, I have been gathering research interviews, archival photographs from Warrington New Town Development Corporation and residents' own photographs to tell an alternative social history of Warrington New Town, which I've posted to my Days of the New Town blog.

Warrington tends to be one of the less discussed of Britain's new towns. It doesn't have the sci-fi credentials of Runcorn or Cumbernauld. It can, however, lay claim to being the site of a bold experimental approach in landscape design inspired by the Dutch Hoempark (Homes in Parkland) – the planting of one of Britain's most extensive urban forests.

I grew up in Birchwood, one of Warrington's expansion areas, between 1980 and 1997. My parents were offered a three-bedroomed house there after satisfying the Development Corporation that they were employable and in need of housing. They had lived in North London from the mid-1970s and moved to Liverpool briefly, where my mum's family lived and where my parents, my sister and I shared a flat with my grandmother and uncle.

> *As a child, my impression of living somewhere completely new was that everyone my age lived somewhere completely new. Only older people lived in older places*

Our new home had a generous front and back garden with parking space. The rent when we moved in was £14.40 a week. As a child, my impression of living somewhere completely new was that everyone my age lived somewhere completely new. Only older people lived in older places. This may have been related to me being one of the youngest in a large extended family, most of whom lived in houses that was either Victorian or from the 1960s, in Liverpool, a place with an actual history. We didn't have that.

As a former resident and a geography lecturer who had taught the social and cultural aspects of modernist planning in the UK, I was in a good position to spend summer 2016 looking through the Warrington New Town Development Corporation collection of the Cheshire Archives in Chester.

I didn't have a clear idea of what I wanted to find out, but in the 19 years since I had lived there, I had reflected on what had been attempted in Warrington New Town in terms of its landscaping. For example, I recall being so moved when I watched the 1979 Tarkovsky film Stalker in the early 2000s.

Was it because 'The Zone' in which the film is mostly set seemed to resemble parts of Warrington's neglected urban forest of leggy silver birches and ponds covered with thick algae, disturbed periodically by a slowly sinking shopping trolley? Pathways that had in the beginning been carefully landscaped with green belts on either side were now darkened alleys with walls of brambles and ivy, and mossy tree trunks that are chainsawed back periodically.

Is this a narrative of failure? Not necessarily. In his book Production of Space, the sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre offers a vocabulary to understand the tension, so apparent in the new town, between what a planner imagines for a space, and what lies beyond that: the lived experiences of its residents, but also the ways residents summon that space in their imaginations.

He conceives of the 'spatial triad' – a way of describing how we can understand a space in three simultaneous ways. The first is our awareness that the space has been conceived – by a planner/architect – prior to our being there. The second is the way our perceptions are influenced by our personal, emotional and imaginative associations with the space. Finally, there is the way that the space has been formed through the way it is used everyday, as a lived space.

These are overlapping layers of conception, experience and behaviour that determine the sims, character and uses of a space. In the case of the new town, there is a palpable tension between the conceived space that is apparent on the information films, for example, the space of the new town as I personally perceive it, and what I know about how it is used as a lived space.

These three levels of understanding and the associated tensions became my starting point for trying to understand new towns now.

Days of the new town

(c) Warrington Development Corporation archive at Cheshire Local Archive

My research focuses on the social histories of two new towns in the north of England: Warrington (designated 1968) and Washington, south of Newcastle upon Tyne (designated 1964).

The outputs so far have been:

- Two photographic exhibitions in Warrington at Museum and Art Gallery and Padgate Library
- Oral history interviews with residents and the managers/planners and designers at the helm of each New Town Development Corporation, as well as current environmental managers
- A stall, presentations and focus groups in each new town.

Planned output:

- Learning resources for GCSE and A-level geography students introducing the new town movement and the specific sides of Warrington and Washington and a critical sense of the social implications of planning at the scale of the new town.

My aim is to develop teacher training sessions on the post-war new town building programme; to develop a critical awareness beyond the well-trodden ground of original aims of new towns from the perspective of the planning sector, towards an understanding of how new towns evolve amid changes in social and political priorities and mores. These include privatisation of housing and other national infrastructure in the 1980s, subsequent cuts in public spending, the current housing crisis and the effects of changes to the planning system since 2010.

These resources will be founded on interviews with residents. In Warrington New Town they seem to have taken on the now-maturing urban forest as their own. Residents are more in touch with seasonal changes, everyone can cycle in safety and many talk proudly about the development corporation's approach.

Equally, people describe a lack of a feeling of community in their new town; even within the same close, people hardly know each other and the design of the new town expansion areas has led to each 'village' feeling self-contained. The unity of purpose between residents, schools, libraries (attached to schools) and the urban ranger service present in the early days has given way to an inward-looking, less cooperative way of organising and being in space.

Although the areas still have a social mix, I've spoken largely to the middle-aged and middle-class residents in 'friends of' groups, trying to keep libraries or parkland accessible.

Once the development corporations were dissolved in 1988-89 there was a lack of will from central and local government to maintain the activities that tended to bring the communities of the new town together. What are the future implications of this?

Image credit | Warrington New Town Development Corporation archive at Cheshire Local Archive

Place histories

Some interesting interventions bring resident-centred reflection upon new towns in the UK into focus. These have come from participatory art organisations, such as Glasshall's Skelmersdale: A New Town.

This project culminated in a 2015 book of interviews with photographs from the development corporation and family albums. Images are still being added to the online archive (see link in box).

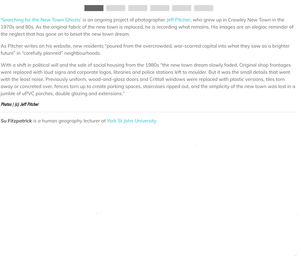
Some interviews hit very personal, truthful notes: the failed experiment discourse is evident, but nuanced in ways that only residents could articulate. One person, who grew up in Skelmersdale, moved away and then back again as an art teacher at Skelmersdale College, reflects upon the damage a place can do in limiting younger residents' horizons and self-esteem. He talks about a pressure he feels to let them know that "not everywhere is like Skem". He talks about urbanisation, class and social mobility, and what he sees as the lack of it in the modern education system in Britain.

This work is important to places that are often flippantly maligned by those who know the areas and those who have never visited. The Poulton Project in Basildon also marks a desire to bring about a public acknowledgement of the ways spaces can be conceived, perceived and lived at once. A panoramic view of the town's built environment has been mounted in the town centre, accompanied by a soundscape of residents discussing different buildings and their personal recollections of them.

The other important dimension of this work is heritage. I am aware of the number of buildings and spaces built by Warrington's Development Corporation that have been demolished over the past five years. The pace of urban renewal does not wait for residents or anyone else to reflect on the significance of a building or space in terms of personal and place histories before they are demolished. As a planning document on the demolition of the indoor market built in central Warrington in 1975 reported: 'Historic England do not wish to offer any comment'.

The people who might be able to argue the case for developing heritage resources around these buildings are not those who tend to be on the statutory consultee list for an application to demolish. Yet the argument for new towns developing such resources exists and is gaining ground with some residents, artists, curators, researchers and archivists.

Crawley then and now



'Searching for the New Town Ghosts' is an ongoing project of photographer Jeff Pitcher, who grew up in Crawley New Town in the 1970s and 80s. As the original fabric of the new town is replaced, he is recording what remains. His images are an elegiac reminder of the neglect that has gone on to beset the new town dream.

As Pitcher writes on his website, new residents "poured from the overcrowded, war-scarred capital into what they saw as a brighter future" in "carefully planned" neighbourhoods.

With a shift in political will and the sale of social housing from the 1980s "the new town dream slowly faded. Original shop frontages were replaced with loud signs and corporate logos, libraries and police stations left to moulder. But it was the small details that went with the least noise. Previously uniform, wood-and-glass doors and Crittall windows were replaced with plastic versions, tiles torn away or concreted over, fences torn up to create parking spaces, staircases ripped out, and the simplicity of the new town was lost in a jumble of uPVC porches, double glazing and extensions."

Photos | (c) Jeff Pitcher

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