

# New Towns Heritage Research Network

Bob Colenutt and Stephen V. Ward

## Context and overview

Planning historians everywhere will be interested in this network recently launched in the UK with support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and several local authorities and agencies. The initiative reflected the increasing realisation that the iconic architectural and urban heritage of post-war New Towns in the UK and mainland Europe is now in danger of being eroded or destroyed. Substantial changes to the carefully planned environments are now occurring as new phases of development seek drastic changes to original planning and design conceptions. Local governments also strive to manage and adapt their towns to reflect the needs and wants of today's society, different in many ways to those when the New Towns were created. Similarly, individual owners seek changes to their homes as their own needs and aspirations change. These and other pressures to change distinctive planned environments that were once seen as models for a new era have triggered intense debates about the value of New Town heritage which is consequently in urgent need of evaluation and consideration.

New Towns were exemplars of utopian social and economic visions allied to Modernist ideas of design and architecture. Initially they were promoted as an answer both to the problems of the large cities that had grown throughout Europe largely during the industrial age and as a way of addressing part of the urgent need for housing after the Second World War. More recently they came under considerable scrutiny when the ideas of New Urbanism on design, density, and community became dominant. Some have argued that the distinctive urban design of New Towns has undermined their subsequent performance. Yet New Towns across Europe are important to urban and cultural studies because they embody particular built forms and urban designs that are associated with a singular moment in the social and economic heritage of these countries.

Post-war New Towns have a remarkable built heritage comprising housing environments, road layouts, shopping centres, iconic buildings, public spaces, and public art which are often considered to be dated and controversial, for example, the road grid system in Milton Keynes or the shopping centres at Harlow and Stevenage. The New Town heritage debate is particularly opportune at a time when post-war modernist heritage is being assessed both in the UK and in Europe partially because it is in need of refurbishment and renewal and increasingly under threat of demolition. A further stimulus is that many New Towns are reaching significant anniversaries. The first UK New Town at Stevenage, designated in November 1946, has recently begun celebrating its seventieth anniversary. New Towns in our Network such as Milton Keynes and Peterborough will be celebrating their fiftieth 'birthdays' in the project period, with Harlow (70) and Zoetermeer (55) also having anniversaries.

The anniversaries are attracting national and international attention to the New Town story. Many are uncertain whether to retain their modernist past, or to create a new identity, or to emphasise their earlier, market town origins. Milton Keynes for example, the most nationally and internationally prominent New Town has decided to promote its modernist design heritage as part of its future strategy.

The Research Network is novel for three reasons. Firstly, the Network project has a distinctly architectural and urban heritage focus not usually associated with post-war New Towns. Most New Town studies have a wider town planning remit and the specific nature of their built environment heritage is little understood and even less appreciated. Secondly, it is a collaboration between New Town researchers from three different sectors - universities, local government and civic society organisations. The Network project is hosted by Oxford Brookes University, in collaboration with Coventry University, the International New Towns Institute (INTI), Milton Keynes Council (MKC), Peterborough Vivacity, and Milton Keynes City Discovery Centre Thirdly, it is an international network enabling comparisons at a European scale, with INTI in Rotterdam taking a leading role.

### **Aims and objectives of the network**

The New Towns Heritage network will contribute to contemporary academic and policy debate about the heritage value of New Towns with the aim of improving architectural understanding and evaluation of New Town heritage in the UK and Europe as a key contributor to the sustainability of these places. There are five specific aims:

1. To create a research community of a national and international multi-disciplinary network of academic, government and civic society researchers, policy makers and practitioners from across the UK and Europe to share resources and ideas, and offer peer support in the field of New Town heritage legacy.
2. To hold five face to face network events over an 18 month period: four Research Seminars, three of them in the south east region of the UK where many of the post-war English New Towns are located (Milton Keynes, Peterborough, Harlow) and one in the Netherlands (Zoetermeer), and a concluding Plenary Conference.
3. To build an evidence base and create opportunities for comparative national and international analysis and collaborative problem-solving by examining the following research questions:
  - (a) How are the utopian social and economic visions which accompanied the New Town Movement embodied in the master planning, urban design and architecture of the New Towns?
  - (b) How can the New Town architectural and urban design heritage be evaluated?
  - (c) How can future planning for these towns accommodate and build on this heritage in a meaningful way, and be integrated into regeneration and growth?

(d) How can key stakeholders in New Towns create an identity and pride for their town, by building cultural capital through their heritage, including architecture, public art and cultural activities?

Each seminar will address these research questions, and the network will work towards a theoretical understanding based on empirical case studies and establish the foundation for further research into the themes of modernist heritage, identity and sustainability.

4. To disseminate results of the research network through publications and continued network activities by creating a distinctive online presence to maximise impact and provide opportunities for further fundraising for research and action.

### **Key activities**

The key activities of this project are four full day research seminars and one plenary conference. The seminars combine local perspectives with wider theoretical and methodological discussions, bringing together researchers from different sectors to create an inter-disciplinary understanding of New Town heritage and generating further research initiatives through the growing network. The final plenary conference will focus on UK and European comparisons and will develop a research agenda which addresses the approach to New Town Heritage as an on-going concern. The network established through the activities will form a continuing resource for the exchange of knowledge and policy advice.

The programme of events from December 2016 to April 2018:

TABLE 1 HERE

### **Participants**

The events will bring together academic, government and community researchers in the fields of urban history and heritage, 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture, and new town planning and design.

The project team will be led by Dr Bob Colenutt (Oxford Brookes University) and Sabine Coady Schaebitz (Coventry University), with the International New Town Institute INTI, Milton Keynes Council, Milton Keynes City Discovery Centre; and Vivacity, Peterborough. An Advisory Group will provide academic and policy advice to the project.

### **Invitation to participate**

It is hoped that the network will be merely the first step of a growing interest and will stimulate comparable initiatives in other countries. To this end, anyone interested in the activities of this network, whether from the two countries being specifically considered here (the UK and the Netherlands) or from elsewhere, are warmly invited to make contact, stating their particular interests and experience.

Please contact: bobcolenutt@msn.com or sward@brookes.ac.uk