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The New Towns Record, 1946-1996: 50 Years of UK New Town Development. The Planning Exchange.

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Among the many planned new urban developments of the twentieth century, the postwar British new towns stand out as one of the boldest and largest experiments. Since the New Towns Act of 1946, 32 new towns have come into existence. They now house over 2.8 million people. For each town, a development corporation was appointed, and empowered for a period of about twenty-five years, to manage its physical, economic and social development. The development corporations commissioned architects and planners. They employed, among others, engineers, site technicians and construction workers to build the infrastructure. Incentives, including cheaper land rates, were offered to businesses to locate to the new areas. And workers were encouraged to move out to the new towns with the promise of better housing and a higher quality residential environment than was offered by the often overcrowded conditions of many existing towns and cities. The Commission for New Towns (CNT) took over the economic and physical management of the new towns when each development corporation had come to the end of its life. This remains an ongoing process, for some of the new towns have still to reach their original population targets. Moreover, planners now discuss the possibility of further new towns, as well as extensions to existing ones. This is because social changes—the rising divorce rate, increasing numbers of single-person and couple-only homes, and of woman-headed households—demand more dwelling units. Hence, urban dispersal in Britain appears to be an unstoppable process, and one which has taken, and continues to take, two major forms. One is a relatively ad hoc suburban growth. The other is the dispersal of the population into planned and spatially contained new towns. New towns were, in fact, partly intended to be an alternative to the dormi-

tory suburbs sprawling across so much of the land. This point is often ignored by the countryside lobby, who remain opposed to almost all urban development, regardless of its character. It is also misunderstood by those politicians and professionals who fetishise city centres, and who would decant people into higher densities in “brown-field” sites, that ridiculous euphemism for inner-urban development areas. The advocates of the development of brown-field sites periodically congratulate themselves on the “back to the city” movement. However, it is still clear that many more people want to live in, or near to, “green-field” areas, in towns which are pleasant and well-planned. This is, furthermore, a thoroughly nuanced process. For many of those who move out to new towns may lament the destruction of the countryside which enables this to happen, but they want to live there just the same. This aspiration is an essential part of British culture. Hence, the *New Towns Record* is a timely and extremely useful contribution to debates about the past, present and future of new towns in the U.K. It has been developed by the Planning Exchange, of Glasgow, as a CD ROM record of the post-war new towns. It is intended for researchers, students and professionals in many subject areas, for example architecture, urban design, town planning, housing policy, geography, sociology, economic development, and urban and social history. The CD-ROM comes in two discs in a boxed set, with a hands-on booklet, as well as a screen-based guide. The contents of the first CD are divided into seven chapters. Chapter One covers the historical context of the new towns programme. It provides a readable and concise account by Terence Bendixson, a journalist and writer on urban affairs, of the first fifty years of the new towns. The chapter also provides good introductory historical overviews of the

English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland developments. Chapter Two presents detailed information on each new town. This includes maps, photographs, statistics, press reports from the time of the designation of each town, sections of individual town plans, and interviews given by leading planners and development corporation workers. These interviews with key professionals are particularly illuminating examples of what might be termed "elite oral history." The interviews cover various aspects of the executive and professional experience, and the advantages and disadvantages of oral history are well in evidence here. There is much that is new for the historical record from such insider's accounts, but also much that is left unsaid. Chapter Three, entitled "Themes and topics," is a rich and wide ranging compendium of subjects. These include commercial and economic development, education, housing and estate management, land use, transportation, general management and administration, a discussion of the changing context of new town master plans, a history of planned communities, a discussion on new town relations with central government, and sections on social planning and social development. Again, there is some fascinating oral history here. For example, social development workers recall their efforts in helping to establish community life in some of the new towns. Moreover, a particularly useful contribution is made by David Donnison, an influential sociologist and advisor to planning organisations. He provides, for example, some critical reminiscences of the new "Californian" ideas in the 1960s about social change and its relationship to urban form. These ideas were to influence the design of the "little Los Angeles" in Bucks, Milton Keynes. Chapter Four is based upon local interviews and surveys. Social historians will find this chapter of particular interest, as it contains correspondence from new town residents, essays by school children and college students on what they like and don't like about their town, and some entertaining and informative soundbites from local people. Their comments are by no means wholly favourable, and this is one of the great merits of the CD-ROM. For too long, histories of the postwar new towns were "top down," written by professionals. Here, we can hear and read resident's accounts of why they moved out to a new town, their experiences of settling in and of community building, and of their perceptions of the changes and problems in their towns. It is a shame, however, that there are not more of such first-hand accounts within these sections. Chapter Five reproduces some key books, articles, individual plans and reports on the new towns. In general, the bringing to-

gether of so many materials will be of great interest and value to researchers. However, the range of titles by specific subjects is somewhat limited. "Architecture and design" and "social," for example, have just two entries each. That said, the editors do invite users to inform them of any materials which might be included in the updated edition of the CD-ROM. Chapter Six is an extensive bibliography, a filmography, and a guide to information sources. The filmography is an extremely useful section, and many users may be pleasantly surprised at the number and diversity of relevant films. Chapter Seven is the glossary and word search, always an essential tool in a voluminous mixed mode database such as this. Disc Two provides the user with the new towns legislation, the annual reports of the development corporations, and the annual reports of the CNT. Disc Two thus brings together materials which would otherwise need to be consulted in dusty volumes of Parliamentary Papers in main libraries, or in the—often incomplete—sets of specific new town development corporation records to be found in local libraries and archives. Disc Two, then, is an invaluable aid to research. However, as with all official records, these should be used with caution: there is a sense in which the positive aspects of growth were accentuated by the corporations, whilst the negative or difficult facets of new town life were minimised. This writer used the software on an IBM Aptiva PC, with Windows 95. The PC has a colour monitor and a sound card, the latter being necessary for recorded interviews. This PC is, however (given the diminishing size of the academic wage) at the cheaper end of the Aptiva range. That said, the package worked effectively. The maps and photographs look terrific. The symbols for cross-referencing and accessing different media are clear. For example, the illustrations and soundbites, once summoned within written text, appear quickly, and can be just as quickly clicked off. The package is generally attractive, but no doubt a computer programmer might say it could be more sophisticated. However, there is little doubt in this reviewer's mind that anyone with more than a passing interest in the new towns will find the database an absorbing experience. This is because it succeeds in its task of presenting a synthesis of diverse source materials which encompass the new town experience. The *New Towns Record* costs £450. For an individual, this is expensive, but municipal and university libraries and their users will be enriched by this expenditure. For not just professionals, but local people and students at all levels of education deserve access to the materials on the *New Towns Record*.

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