

A New Career in a New Town

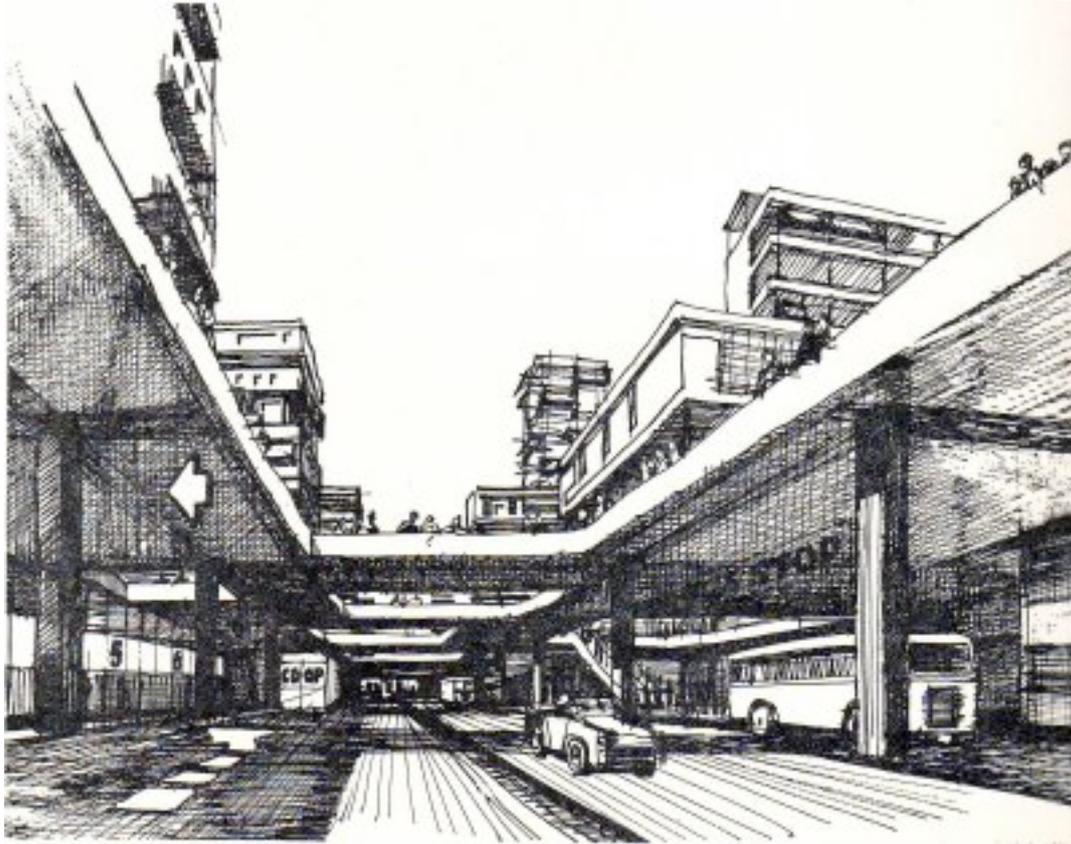
Owen Hatherley

*Newtown, where everybody goes around
taking televisino...ⁱ*

The Slits, 'Newtown', 1979

Arrival

In Powell and Pressburger's 1945 propaganda film for a Modernist new England rising out of the murk of the depression and total war, *A Matter of Life and Death*, when you die you go to a heaven like a Aalto sanatorium. Everything is shiny, technologically efficient and gleaming. So imagine you're a dweller in a Victorian tenement, around mid century. There's washing lines criss-crossing the backyards, there's perhaps an outside toilet, there are brick or stone-built buildings giving off a crumbling solidity, an air of picturesque squalor. Then you're offered a new career in a new town. Clean lines, space, glass, steel. In the self-contained 'neighbourhood' that you have been assigned to is someone known as an 'Arrivals Officer'. They show you round this new environment, pointing out maybe the rather daring design of the Methodist church, the strange yet teeming 'Megastructure' at the centre of town, then he or she takes you to the concrete concaves of the 'Fun Palace'; finally taking you home to your one of the rows of rectilinear houses, explaining the curves and intersections of the peculiar sculptures that sit at the centre of public parks on the way. Your own secular Virgil to guide you through the new world.



This must be the (non)place

The South East of England in the first decade of the 21st century is a place where Heritage has destroyed History. On the outskirts of cities and towns, an image of a prelapsarian (or pre-technological) past wraps itself around the ubiquitous gadgets and machines of 21st century modernity. A ride in a train on a diagonal line from London would find, in amongst the cottages, retail parks and US military bases a few things which could be described as ‘towns’, with a unified identity and presence, which declare themselves to be a Place. The Saddam-issue crossed sword arches, shopping centres and business parks of Basingstoke, or further West, Prince Charles’ fantasy New Town of Poundbury, the British equivalent to the Disney New Town of Celebration, both presided over by large-eared figures of ridicule, all the better to mask their sinister implications. Nothing can happen here, nothing has ever happened here, the 20th century was a bad dream. In amongst these places are those that declared their modernity from the outset: the towns created *ex nihilo* after the Second World War in a brief flush of Social Democracy, their names combining the sound of an everyplace, evoking scenes of pedestrianised precincts looked over by rectilinear clocktowers: Stevenage, Basildon, Harlow, Runcorn, Cumbernauld, Milton Keynes...

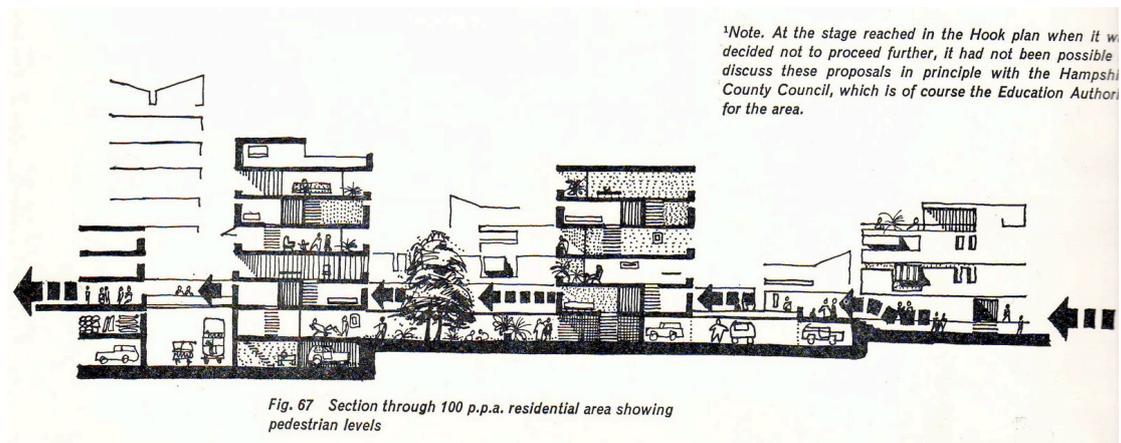


Fig. 66 View of north end of central area, housing and lake

History in the City/The City against History

Reading *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford's vast compendium running from insect colonies to the Ziggurat of Ur and on to the 19th century Metropolis, it becomes clear that for him there are two models of what the City ought to be, and mostly isn't. The first is the medieval walled city, more often than not in Northern Europe, a community of artisans and guilds, with its space strictly limited yet with a genuinely urban countenance, with pigs roaming the streets yet urbane and cultured. The other is the mid 20th century Garden City or New Town, more often than not in Britain. This was at once an attempt to freeze history, by setting a pre-set limit to the new town's growth, but also a fulfilment of it. Although it might have been dismissed as superficial, a way of hiding a new kind of suburb, for Mumford this was 'so antipathetic is this to the dominant ideology and practice of our time, that many still regard this programme as a wholly chimerical one, doomed to failure by the very nature of our expanding technological economy. So large is this blind spot, that they dismiss as unreal every evidence of its success'ⁱⁱ. Even in the early 60s when Mumford was writing, the New Town had a quality of the numinal about it, was a mirage seemingly waiting to be found out. But nonetheless, we are told, in Stevenage or Harlow the spirit of the medieval city reconstitutes itself via flat roofs and glass

promenades, open space and precise planning. The past reclaimed for the sake of the future. Both now figure as an absence in favour of the stagnation of an eternal present.



Circular Time

A typical element of the Southern English landscape: one couldn't quite call it a town, or a city, or a village, with not enough connection to somewhere else to be a suburb, is called Hook. Hook is on the edge of the mostly smugly affluent county of Hampshire, and appears to have at its centre a circular arrangement of business parks, ring roads and empty space, with diffuse cottages stretching out until it becomes designated as a different area. Hook was once going to be, at the very least, a different sort of non-place: it was going to be a New Town, and this circularity would be replaced with dynamism and angularity, inertia with force.

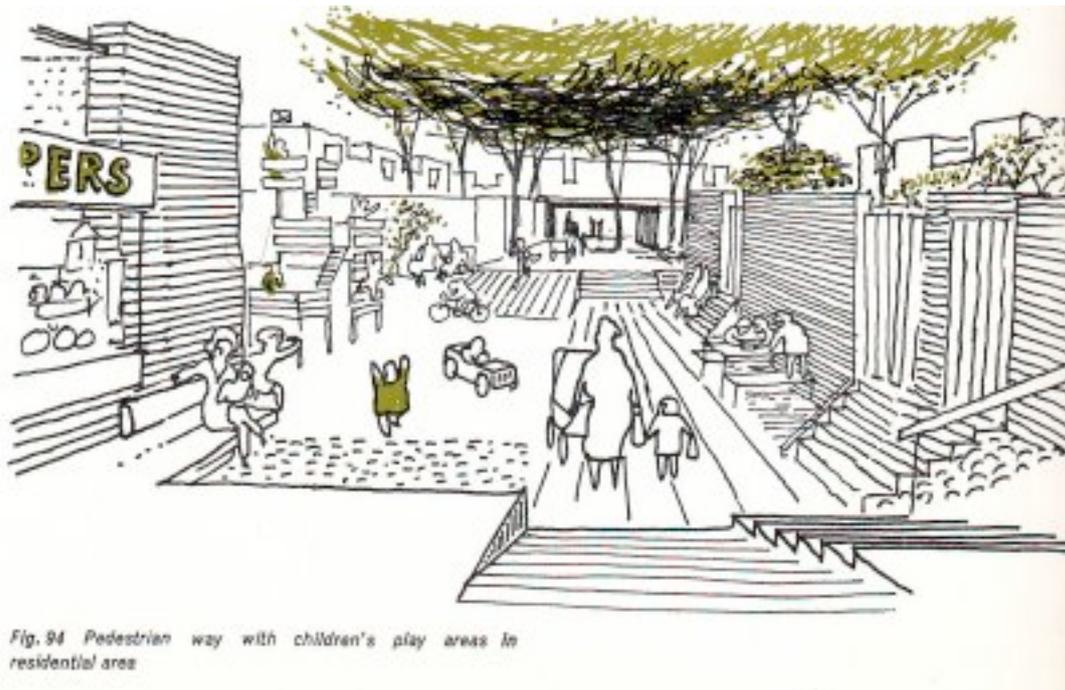


Fig. 94 Pedestrian way with children's play areas in residential area

The Planning of a New Town

The Hook Masterplan is immediately redolent of the future that failed to come to pass. The Greater London Council began in the early 1960s to put together a comprehensive plan to be imposed on the village of Hook, which was published, replete with illustrations, as *The Planning of a New Town* in 1965ⁱⁱⁱ. By that time it was already a document of a place which did not exist and was never going to exist, as the GLC had been refused planning permission in the interim. So the book represents a scheme that, no longer given particular reference to an actual place, can become as abstract as Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*, which in part it resembles. The bulk of the book is taken up with discussions of the occupational balance of the inhabitants, sewage disposal plans and so forth. The drawings, however, immediately bring the contemporary reader up against the sheer strangeness of mid-century normality. The rectilinear geometry of the structures that dominate the town is effaced by a cute, scribbly line, as eminently regular people walk through a landscape of (to a reader in 2007) startling Modernism. A schematised public is constantly interacting. What do these little peoploids dream of, one wonders?

Market Area on Pedestrian Deck

The Hook plan is full of what is today regarded as fundamentally impossible. There is a total separation of cars and streets, so that one is able to walk through the entire city

without crossing a single road. There are pictures of people mowing their lawns, cheerfully amidst the sharp angles of an unrelentingly futuristic architecture. There would be ‘off-ground outdoor rooms’, compact housing and cluster tower blocks. The centre would be a Megastructure, a building akin to an organism, performing multiple functions, drawing all around towards it, capable of growing outwards if needed, and connected with the outside by Fritz Lang walkways. The car, as it would no longer be dominating the city, slowing itself down in the process, would then return to its original promise of untrammelled speed: the Hook New Town was to have no traffic lights. No stops, no pauses, perpetual motion. A building like this was built in the New Town of Cumbernauld. It perpetually wins ‘worst building in Britain’ awards, its dilapidated appearance almost confirmation of The Slits’ 1979 dystopia, where people in football colours shoot up, wait around for fights, act as the visual confirmation of the failure of benign social engineering^{iv}.

The Plan: Totalitarian

The death of the street

Classification of Simple Speeds and Complex Speeds

Arrangements made to come to an agreement on imminent LAWS of machine civilisation, laws which can halt the menace of modern times

The mobilisation of the soil, in both cities and rural areas

Housing as a branch of the public services

The green city

The civilisation of the road replacing the civilisation of the railway

Landscaping the countryside

The radiant city

The radiant country

The twilight of money

The essential joys, satisfaction of psycho-physiological needs, collective participation, and individual liberty

The renaissance of the human body

Le Corbusier's 14 principles of *La Ville Radieuse*,
1935^v

To-Morrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform

The original plan for a Garden City by Ebenezer Howard in 1898 featured an illustration of several interconnected circles, each one a discrete New Town with an appropriately harmonic name: Concord, Rurisville, Justitia^{vi}. On the outskirts of the 'Central City', in amongst the New Forest, is space left for those who in some way find that their vision is clouded, that they are unable to look at the New World with sufficient clarity. 'Homes for Waifs'. 'Home for Inebriates'. 'Insane Asylum', and finally 'Epileptic Farms'. Perhaps this is why in Richard Huelsenbeck and Raoul Hausmann's Manifesto of Berlin Dada, they advocated 'the creation of garden cities and cities of light', to give the insane plenty of room to play in.^{vii}

The New Mobility

The sleeve notes to Belbury Poly's *The Owl's Map* are a mock tourist guide to a complete fictional New Town. A photograph of a building with the sort of cleanly rectilinear glass curtain walls that dominated the town centre of Harlow or 'Seconday Modern' schools anywhere, and a text which assumes the cheerfully technocratic tone of the GLC's *The Planning of a New Town*. The concomitance of this with the record's seeming evocation of seances, references to all manner of supernatural undercurrents, underlines how it is in fact the rationality of Post-War Utopianism that now has a truly oneiric quality: its original rhetoric of 'dreams' becoming a spectrality that haunts the pragmatism of the Blairite metropolis. What is evoked is a benign, bygone paternalist socialism in the face of an increasingly dystopian hypercapitalism. What is appealing is how unprepossessing they are- how unwilling to announce their dissonance. They fit the terms of the 'miniature art' described by one-time postmaster general Tony Benn: tiny, intricate, geometric miniatures, simplistic and baffling. How quietly they make their assault on temporality- the imposed eternal present is replaced by a sweet indistinctness, time isn't ruptured but smeared, blurred.

*All cities are geological. You can't take three
steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the*

prestige of their legends. We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us back to the past. Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary.

In Chirico's paintings (during his arcade period) an empty space creates a richly filled time.

Ivan Chitchevlov, 'Formulary for a New Urbanism',
International Situationniste 1, 1958^{viii}

Public Space, Outer Space

In the 21st century city there is no more public space. There is the third place of course, the spot where you can look at vaguely ethnic murals while enjoying a latte, there is the place where you live and the place where you work- you are implored to own the former and someone else certainly owns the latter. In the mid-century New Towns fundamentally the entire city was public space: huge swathes of pointless, empty green, left there seemingly for the sake of their own attractive desolation, punctuated by public sculpture, water gardens. In Harlow there was one of the best collections of 20th century sculpture in the world, scattered around working class estates. In part of Peterlee, a New Town for Miners that was originally planned by the Anglo-Soviet architect Berthold Lubetkin, there is a central feature that was neither architecture or sculpture. As if in summation of space-race optimism, named by its designer Victor Pasmore *The Apollo Pavilion*.^{ix} Interlocking concrete slabs over a lake, surrounded by green space, a tribute to the optimism and relentless technological motion forward of the post-war boom. The Pavilion is now referred to by locals as 'the Monstrosity'.

Planned Obsolescence

The New Towns were for *all*. Mostly social housing in the first instance, they stopped being built at exactly the same time as the demise of the latter, with the ushering in of Thatcherism at the turn of the 80s, at which point the future had to be forcibly stopped. The current equivalent might be something like Dongtan in China, an entire sustainable city that will be rendered fundamentally irrelevant by the building of many more towns along the lines of the 19th century gangster capitalism that the New

Towns were supposed to be the antithesis of^x. Hence, the only way to experience them is via their ghosts, traversing the split level precincts that would now be occupied by Charity Shops and Pound Stores. The places with a truly utopian charge are precisely those which are most quotidian, and you can try and see walking around the precincts the Victorian reformers, the East End families escaping the slums, the scribbled humanoids of the Hook drawings. All bound for a new life in somewhere that was neither metropolis, suburb or countryside, but would rather, as per the recommendations of the *Communist Manifesto*, create something that abolished the divide between town and country while preserving the airiness and space of one and the modernity and speed of the other, that would be the enemy of History for the sake of its fulfilment.

ⁱ The Slits, *Cut*, (Island 1979)

ⁱⁱ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (Pelican 1974), p594

ⁱⁱⁱ Greater London Council, *The Planning of a New Town* (GLC, 1965). All the drawings are taken from this document.

^{iv} See for instance this BBC Report:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/1668464.stm>

Or for a perspective that stresses the utopian nature of its original planning, Gordon Murray's 'Appreciating Cumbernauld' in *Architectural Design* Vol 76, No 1, *Manmade Molecular Megastructures* eds Abley/Schwinge, (Wiley-Academy, 2006) is a rare defence of the Megastructural New Town.

^v As quoted in Jonathan Raban's *Soft City* (Harvill 1998), p19)

^{vi} Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (Faber and Faber, 1946)

^{vii} Quoted in Ivo Kranzfelder, *Grosz* (Taschen 1994) p32

^{viii} Available at <http://www.bopsecrets.org/Sl/Chtcheglov.htm>

^{ix} See http://www.nothingtoseehere.net/2006/11/the_apollo_pavillion_peterlee.html

^x On Dongtan, there are drawings on Arup's site.

<http://www.arup.com/eastasia/project.cfm?pageid=7047>