

Planning for New Towns: The Gap Between Theory and Practice *

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Influential members of the urban planning profession have developed certain ideas about new town design, including notions such as self-containment, social balance, and the neighborhood unit. These parallel, to some extent, concepts that have emerged from the field of community sociology. Efforts to put these ideas into practice have fallen far short of the mark. Without more sophisticated implementation mechanisms, better theories of social interaction at the neighborhood level, and new approaches to citizen participation, efforts to build new towns are likely to remain severely crippled. The aim of this paper is to summarize past efforts to translate implicit theories of social organization into actual new town designs. The possibilities of closing the gap between theory and practice through the use of more explicit forms of social experimentation are discussed in the context of the fledgling new towns program in the United States.

New Towns have been built for many reasons: to relieve congestion and overcrowding in large urban centers (Britain), to develop frontier regions (the Soviet Union), to exploit concentrated resources (Venezuela), to defend captured territories (Israel), to provide a showcase for technological innovations (United States), to symbolize a new political or economic orientation (Turkey), and to absorb and acculturate

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migrants (Australia).¹ However, many of the ideas upon which planners have based their designs have not been subjected to rigorous analysis. This is particularly true in so far as the social organization of planned communities is concerned. This paper identifies several concepts of social organization that new town planners have deployed for their purposes—largely unsuccessfully. There are some interesting parallels between the ideas of the new town planners and the work of community sociologists, although there appear to be few if any direct linkages.

SELF-CONTAINMENT, SOCIAL BALANCE, AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD UNIT

In their study of Springdale (an upstate New York town) Vidich and Bensman identified a number of institutional mechanisms by which small communities sustain the illusion that the pressures of urbanization, industrialization, and bureaucratization are subordinate to local demands.² Although the reverse is more likely to be true, the extent to which local activity patterns can reinforce certain life-styles points to the highly sophisticated process of socialization that takes place at a community level.

Vidich and Bensman did not publish their study of *Small Town in Mass Society* until the late 1950s, but earlier versions of the same idea are not difficult to spot. Their diagnosis is reminiscent, for example, of the ideas advanced by one of the earliest community sociologists—Ferdinand Tönnies. In his major work, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tönnies argued that “members of a community are relatively immobile in a physical and a social way: individuals neither travel far from their locality of birth nor do they rise up the social hierarchy.”³ Hillary’s exhaustive review of the literature suggests that most community studies assume that a person’s fate depends more on local patterns of local interaction than on broader societal forces.⁴

What Vidich and Bensman labeled the myth of local autonomy recalls Ebenezer Howard’s original proposal for self-contained garden cities. Howard’s proposal, aimed originally at decanting London’s large and growing population, called for the development of new self-contained communities of approximately 30,000 people. Each community was to be surrounded by a permanent greenbelt and equipped to meet a full range of social, economic, and cultural needs. Unified land ownership and clearly articulated neighborhood units were intended to capture the most desirable aspects of city and country living. Howard assumed that each new town would be able to meet all the social needs of its residents and to recapture the simpler life of pre-industrial England.⁵

To the extent that planned communities have lured families away from

overcrowded metropolitan areas, they have done so by creating and sustaining the illusion that it is possible to escape the pervasive influences of mass society. This has been accomplished by suggesting that everyone can find better housing and higher-paying jobs merely by moving to a new town; assurances have been offered that a planned community can control its destiny through the manipulation of land uses and careful adherence to a master plan. In a very real sense, the success of a new town depends on the developer's ability to market the illusion of local autonomy. From the planners' standpoint, social networks and supporting institutions must be established that will engender a common sense of purpose and a shared image of how the community should look in the distant future.

A second new town planning concept is the notion of social balance. Socially balanced communities are those which provide a mix of places to work and to live as well as a population that is heterogeneous with respect to age, occupation, income, ethnicity, and class. J. S. Buckingham's plan for New Victoria (1849), for example, called for

An entirely new town . . . peopled by an adequate number of inhabitants with such due proportions between the agricultural and manufacturing classes and between possessors of capital, skill, and labour as to provide . . . the highest degree of health, contentment, morality, and enjoyment yet seen in any existing community.⁶

Howard's garden city proposal suggested the desirability of including "all true workers of whatever grade."

The Reith Committee, set up in 1945 to plan the development of the British new towns program, suggested that the main problem was "one of class distinctions . . . if the community is to be truly balanced, so long as social classes exist, all must be represented in it. A contribution is needed from every type and class of person, the community will be poorer if all are not there."⁷ The Committee seemed to accept the need for social balance without any reservation.

The balanced community explicitly recognizes the existence of class distinctions but attempts to induce social mixing through physical proximity and the sharing of facilities. It has been suggested by many new town planners that there are good reasons for seeking such balance: the upper and middle classes provide models for emulation, models of enterprise, and to a lesser extent, models of behavior. Balance also implies social harmony. Moreover, the economic life of a new town might be seriously jeopardized without a diversity of skill groups in the local population. Still other interpretations have been ventured. Ruth Glass argues that a balanced community provides for social control (under the guise of leadership) that would otherwise be lacking in the working class, which, if

brought together without the restraints of the old established community, might constitute a threat to the established order.⁸ Similar arguments, implicitly supporting the *embourgeoisement* of the working class, have found their way into planning strategies designed to promote social balance in American new towns.⁹

Implicit theories of community stratification provide a scaffolding upon which the concept of social balance rests. The presumption that various social groups have different childrearing practices and social service needs is basic to the programming of new town facilities. Warner, Hollingshead, Lenski, Landecker, and others have argued that in every community an unambiguous class structure exists based on differentials in social position, family status, and relative influence in local affairs; this sustains the planners' presuppositions.¹⁰ Although stratification studies have come under increasing fire within the sociological profession in recent years, the news has yet to penetrate the planning literature. Indeed, the possibility that planners may be reinforcing some aspects of stratification by freezing class differentials into rigid physical designs is rarely discussed in planning circles.

To planners involved in the creation of new towns, social balance implies reproducing some standard or average demographic profile.

In the development of Crawley New Town the aim was to achieve a similar balance to that of England and Wales in the local (new town) population. In social class terms, a balanced community is thus one which conforms to the class characteristics of England and Wales¹¹

Social balance can refer to the population mix in the town as a whole (what Gans calls macro-integration) or to the mix of social groups within residential or neighborhood clusters (micro-integration).

Micro-integration carries with it the possibility of actual integration; it means that people of different classes and races will be sharing those physical spaces in which potential integration could become actual integration. Micro-integration does not automatically require actual integration, however, for even next door neighbors can avoid social intercourse. Nevertheless, such avoidance is not easy, and more important, it is not pleasant, for most people want to be friendly with their neighbors if at all possible. Macro-integration puts less pressure on people to engage in actual integration, without, however, precluding it. Instead they have the opportunity to engage in social relations with heterogeneous community members on a voluntary basis.¹²

The principles of micro-integration were given their classic formulation by Clarence Perry in what he defined as the neighborhood unit:

a residential area which provides housing for the population for which one elementary school is ordinarily required, its actual area depending on its population density . . . bounded on all sides by arterial streets sufficiently wide to facilitate its bypassing instead of penetration by through traffic. . . . Sites for the school and other institutions having service spheres coinciding with the limits of the unit should be suitably grouped around a central point.¹³

Most new town plans call for little more than a collection of neighborhood units organized around a central business district. For example, the British new town of Harlow is divided into four neighborhood clusters of 20,000 people each. The clusters are made up of two, three, or four small neighborhoods of 5,000 to 6,000 based on the size of catchment areas for primary education.

In the smaller neighborhoods, which remain the basic planning units, the primary school is brought within safe walking distance for children, and the housewife is never more than one-half kilometer from a small group of shops. At the same time the neighborhood center placed at the principal focus within the cluster can support a very considerable range of community services.¹⁴

Each neighborhood is intended to facilitate close social interaction among families presumed to share the same set of values and life expectations. There have been serious disagreements on the appropriate size of neighborhoods. Proposals range from 5,000 or even less up to 20,000. Those favoring smaller neighborhoods argue that they are more cohesive and offer more intimate contact. Others argue that 15,000 to 20,000 people are required to support an effective and varied neighborhood center.¹⁵ Population arrangements are enforced through the design and pricing of residential units. The key assumption in neighborhood planning is that most people will value convenience, that is, a shorter distance from home to services and amenities, more than they will value extremely low densities.¹⁶

The neighborhood concept was not invented by sociologists, but various interpretations of the neighborhood principle (ranging from the notion of a service area designed to reduce unnecessary expenditures of time and energy to an effort to recreate a rural way of life with its closely compacted primary groups) find indirect support in classic studies of social stratification.¹⁷ This is true not only in terms of what sociologists have identified as the need for separate settings for different groups in the same community but also in terms of the conflicts that sociologists have warned are likely to arise if incompatible groups are forced to live at close quarters.

The neighborhood unit was discarded in plans for the new town of Corby (England), for Cumbernauld (Scotland), and, more recently, in

the new town of Skelmersdale (England). The planning consultants involved pointed out that increasing car ownership has created a more mobile population better able to satisfy its interests over a wider field. This seems to make sense. Nevertheless, the neighborhood unit has reappeared in almost all recent master plans for American new towns.¹⁸ Perhaps its re-appearance suggests a hidden agenda. The neighborhood unit may be the only acceptable means of achieving social balance without opening up the floodgates of indiscriminate mixing of social classes.

To understand why and how key concepts have found their way into the planning field, Gans suggests that it is important to ask who the planners are, what means they have at their disposal, and what interest groups they feel they are serving.¹⁹ Most planners bring a middle-class view of city life to their professional careers and are beholden to government agencies and private developers for their jobs. Gans suggests that the neighborhood boundaries typically drawn by professional planners tend to ignore class divisions in the population, except those manifested by differences in housing type.

Favoring low density and small-town living, the planners seek to achieve the cessation of residential mobility and the control and minimization of future growth. The only land uses programmed for future growth [are] those favored by affluent residents, high-status industrial and commercial establishments, and real estate interests catering to these and the tax collector.²⁰

His caricature is probably overdrawn, but it does raise some important questions. If the British experience is any indication, new town planners in the United States are likely to have considerable difficulty trying to make their new town plans work. The next section of this paper examines some of the problems involved and possibilities of implementing the concepts mentioned above.

THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

As a means of promoting economic development in lagging regions and of organizing additional growth in metropolitan areas, new towns have worked reasonably well.²¹ The first generation of British new towns, for example, proved that public development was a decidedly feasible strategy.²² As examples of physical design, new towns have not been extraordinarily exciting, but there have been instances of highly competent and imaginative architecture.

To get a sense of what new towns have been able to do, it is necessary to look at their overall impact on national growth patterns, or at the very

least, their influence on development trends within key metropolitan areas.²³ In Britain the initial function of the new towns effort was to service the overspill population of London and to tidy up the excesses of speculative development. The most significant possibility—that of guiding, perhaps even dominating, critical interrregional and intraregional relationships—did not come into play until the initiation of a second generation of new towns in the mid-1960s.²⁴

One element of the success of the British new towns program was the government's willingness to provide incentives for industrial relocation. When a system of depreciation allowances (permitting write-offs of new investments against taxes) proved inadequate, the government offered more powerful grants-in-aid and tax incentives to help with the initial costs of capital construction. The British experience supports the planners' assertion that new towns can be used to implement national development policies as long as the public sector plays a leading role. This is not to say that private interests need not be involved. However, if public policy had not informed decisions regarding the number, scale, and location of planned new towns, the relative advantages of this form of development would never have been realized.

The new city of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela attests to the fact that it may be possible to realize a "social profit" via public land ownership and intelligent tax policy.²⁵ Late in 1960 the Venezuelan government set up the Corporacion Venezolana de Guayana (CVG) to develop the Guayana region, one of the country's greatest natural resource areas. The CVG was given the job of planning and building a major new city. Since the government owned the land, CVG was able to preserve the essence of its plan through public land ownership. The Corporation kept the land it needed for community purposes. Above all, public ownership offered CVG an opportunity to capture a reasonable share of the income and concentration of values it helped to create. Since commercial land and some of the better quality residential and industrial sites were likely to be the most profitable, CVG retained this land and sold the remainder (subject to restrictions on its use).

Although the opportunity to build a new city from the ground up seemed at the outset to be the answer to a planner's dream, there were serious stumbling blocks. The absence of trained technicians and workers, established community relations and loyalties, basic consumer and business services, and adequate community facilities created certain strains. Attracted by the prospect of jobs, poor migrants invaded the area, putting up makeshift shelters and complicating the task of organizing land uses and public services. Because of the great distance to an established city center, the initial cost of development was enormously inflated. Nevertheless, by the early 1970s, the city was well on its way to achieving its

projected population of 250,000. The natural riches of the area were successfully drawn into the mainstream of the Venezuelan economy.

Offset against these partial successes have been a series of difficult problems. The experience to date confirms the early predictions of the new town critics who claimed that (1) small size and low density would not be essential to the design of desirable living environments; (2) investments in new towns would shortchange inner city redevelopment efforts; (3) serious problems of adjustment would plague new residents during the first stages of development; and (4) difficult social issues would arise which had been overlooked entirely.

Sufficient evidence has now accumulated to support many of these predictions. First, limitations on size and density have indeed created problems. For one thing, the cost of living in new towns has been somewhat higher than in big cities. Although individual neighborhoods were organized around compact service centers, overall densities have been relatively low and have resulted in higher prices not only for housing, but also for many public services spread out over larger areas.²⁶ Higher costs, in turn, have narrowed the range of residents, lopping off any chance of relocation for the lowest income groups. Lower densities have also minimized the attractiveness of certain industrial sites. Industries looking for densely settled areas to provide outlets for their products, proximity to smaller supporting firms, and highly specialized labor have not been attracted to new towns.

Restrictions on horizontal or slightly upward mobility from one job to another have handicapped new town residents expecting to live near their place of work. Increased mobility, in fact, has been a key factor in shattering the self-containment concept in Britain. A recent study shows that in the eight original new towns built around London "there are 76 persons who live in a new town and work outside it or commute to a new town for work, for every 100 who both live and work in the same new town."²⁷ The relatively small size of most new towns has also minimized the chances of providing diversified services and amenities. Specialty shops and cultural activities have been difficult to sustain outside high density urban centers. As it turns out, small size and relatively low density, even in a totally planned environment, only make sense when one assumes that the residents will settle into a job, a house, and a neighborhood for all time to come.

The second prediction that came true was that new towns would undercut efforts to rebuild central cities. Not only have new town planning programs siphoned off money that might have been used to rehabilitate deteriorating core areas, but they also have skimmed off upwardly mobile workers who otherwise might have stayed behind and tried to improve matters. Certain industries intent on expanding were lured to new towns on the outskirts of metropolitan areas and subsidized by the government

while the fiscal capacities of central cities continued to erode. In what may have been the most unexpected blow, new towns riveted public attention on the suburbs and promoted the fantasy of garden city living, thus drawing a curtain over the difficulties plaguing big cities.

A number of studies have reported a phenomenon known as the "new town blues" or "transitional neurosis."²⁸ Early new town residents have had great difficulty making friends. They feel cut off from long-standing social ties. Wives in particular are lonely. Lives in general are more strained. Shops and public houses, close at hand in old inner city neighborhoods, are nonexistent or more distant in new towns and thus unable to serve as social centers.²⁹ To a great extent these problems are transitory, but in a larger sense the migration to new towns has ripped apart the close-knit fabric of kin and neighbors in many cities. While some degree of disorientation has always accompanied a move, families in difficulty in new towns are not likely to find helping institutions to fall back on.

Other social issues have also arisen for which the planners were not prepared. In his study of two British new towns, Willmott identifies a number of problems, including imbalance in the population structure and the difficulty of integrating social groups via the neighborhood unit.³⁰ People moving to new towns have been predominantly young couples with small children. This age bias has created an early demand for extensive social services and facilities that quickly become outmoded as the population matures.³¹ It has also generated a lack of diversity in social activities.³²

Few of the assumptions regarding the importance of the neighborhood unit as a socializing device have been borne out.³³ As a way of structuring community life around the provision of schools, shops, and other services, the concept has not worked particularly well. Perhaps it has been applied too inflexibly. In England, the emphasis on the distinctiveness of neighborhood populations did not fit with the patterns of social interaction that developed.³⁴ Perhaps, too, the neighborhood unit was too large a locality (5,000 to 10,000 residents) for most people. The residents did not identify with the neighborhoods laid out by the planners.³⁵ Part of the problem stemmed from the surprising degree of cross-commuting into and out of many new towns.³⁶ In any event, the neighborhood unit is not the locus of informal social relations it was supposed to be.

The problems of achieving social balance and of organizing a community into manageable parts have taken their toll of new town planning theory. The search for fresh paradigms of social and economic organization goes on. In the meantime, preliminary results of privately financed efforts to build new towns in the United States suggest two other difficulties. The first is race relations. The second is the problem of maintaining the myth of local autonomy in the face of encroaching social disorganization.

Too little is known about attitudes toward racial integration and about behavior in integrated situations to permit firm conclusions about whether or not racial integration is possible in new towns.³⁷ However,

Racial micro-integration is rare, except temporarily when communities are in racial transition and until the "tipping point" is reached, and it is rare in most new towns because it has not often been tried, except on a token basis. Still, it exists in new towns such as Columbia, Reston, and the Levitt-built Willingboro, but partly because the blacks who moved into these towns were of high status.³⁸

What seems to be emerging is general agreement on at least one point: racial integration among neighborhoods or residential clusters will be most feasible when there are no significant class differences between the races, or when minority racial groups are of higher status than the whites.³⁹ Gans suggests that racial integration will probably be most feasible in upper-middle-class areas. This is not very promising, however, because the new towns program in the United States is supposed to provide housing for low- and moderate-income groups and particularly for minority groups trapped in the central city. The task of weaving low-income minority families into the social fabric of a new town is beyond anything planners can handle at the present time.

The notion of the new town as a sanctuary from overcrowding and urban blight is already breaking down in the United States. In Columbia, Maryland, one of the few American new towns to reach a preliminary population threshold of 10,000, the problems of crime, vandalism, and racial tension have already surfaced.⁴⁰ Future efforts to market planned communities as morally cohesive minisocieties immune to larger social problems will become increasingly difficult. Developers must find new ways of sustaining the myth of local autonomy, otherwise they will lose their drawing power.

One last problem also deserves attention. Private developers in the United States and public development corporations in other countries have all had great difficulty finding ways to involve new town residents in community governance. Unless community residents are involved at least to some extent in development decisions and ongoing management operations they can impede the pace of development.⁴¹ The negative aura of community dissent can also sabotage a new town's marketability, to say nothing of the corrosive effects such confrontation can have on the fragile bonds of trust and friendship that new residents must try to build.

In summary, there appear to be at least three major obstacles to implementing the concepts of social organization implicit in most new town plans. The first is the lack of sufficiently powerful implementation mecha-

nisms. Techniques for attracting and maintaining a heterogeneous population have no more than a hit-or-miss quality about them. There are neither incentives nor controls strong enough (except in a totalitarian regime) to induce balanced migration or social interaction among groups that prefer not to mix. Efforts to organize local patterns of family life around neighborhood service centers have faltered: first, because they have failed to take account of sharp discontinuities in the age structure; and second, because the trade-off between density and convenience has not been as important as the planners originally suspected. Finally, the problem of maintaining the illusion of economic opportunity and self-sufficiency in the face of preliminary signs of social deterioration has become more difficult than ever. Greater mobility, the increasing impact of mass communications, and the footloose character of a highly urbanized population make it extremely difficult to pretend that new towns can somehow be shielded from social problems typically found in central cities.

A second obstacle is the lack of a grounded theory of social interaction at the neighborhood level. We have yet to discover how to organize supporting institutions to help ease the process of entry. Moreover, there does not seem to be any general agreement about the best way of arranging social services and community facilities. Most new towns are organized around the neighborhood unit (which in turn assumes that elementary education is the key to social organization). In addition, it is impossible to disregard the often violent reactions of suburban dwellers to the immigration of blacks, the poor, and other minority groups. In the United States, civil rights groups have spearheaded efforts for many years to pierce the exclusivity of the suburbs. Racial equality, fair housing, and integration have been their bywords. Today, however, the passion for ethnic autonomy has confused the issue. With political control of several major cities practically within their grasp, many black leaders are extraordinarily wary of new town proposals which they view as part of a dispersal or integrationist strategy. Anything that threatens to dilute their emerging political majority is subject to careful scrutiny and, more often than not, severe criticism. It is not clear whether one segment or the other of the black community will dominate, or whether an alliance will be forged that can somehow reinforce their separate objectives. Nor is it clear how other groups will react to this situation. It may be, however, that various minority groups will prefer to build new towns that they can control and in which they can remain relatively separate.⁴²

A third obstacle is the problem of responding to resident demands for participation in local affairs. The financial feasibility of a new town as well as its hope for a more efficiently organized land use pattern, hinge on adherence to a master plan. This seems to preclude any significant role for new community residents in the decision making process. Moreover, in

light of the fact that the first wave of residents may want to “pull up the drawbridge,” this is a particularly knotty problem. These are indeed serious problems, and they threaten the success of the fledgling new towns program in the United States. There may be a number of ways, however, of overcoming these obstacles and of narrowing the gap between theory and practice.

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POSSIBILITIES

The concept of planning has broadened over time, escalating from an early preoccupation with town and county problems, to a regional and even a national concern for the formulation of overall growth strategies. While efforts to build small, self-contained new communities were supported originally as a way of decentralizing big cities, recent generations of planners have argued for larger new towns which they hope will act as magnets pulling growth to lagging regions. The problems of planning for social aspects of community life, however, are still as intractable as ever.

The British new towns program was launched on the assumption that the long-term problems caused by the industrial revolution could be solved by restoring people to the land and by financing continuing city improvements out of the increment in land values collected via rents (public ownership). Social problems, to the extent that they were considered at all, were correlated with unlimited city size, high neighborhood density, and the great distance between job opportunities and residential areas. While big cities implied unlimited size and high densities, new towns would be programmed to achieve an optimal size and density. The problematic journey to work would be eliminated because people would live where they worked. The neighborhood unit was selected as the basic building block in the planners’ design, representing a coherent clustering of social groups with relatively similar needs and expectations. It all seemed to make such good sense, yet the outcome has been surprisingly unsuccessful. In what ways were the new town planners misdirected? Might it be possible to adjust the new towns policy recently adopted in the United States in order to avoid many of the same disappointments?

New town development in the United States began in earnest with the passage of the Urban Growth and New Community Development Act of 1970. This act provides attractive incentives to public and private entrepreneurs and investors interested in the planned development of “socially and economically sound new communities.” The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is empowered to provide loans, grants, and interest subsidies for the development of new-towns-in-town (the clearance and redevelopment of “functionally obsolete properties” in the

central cities), planned suburban communities, and new towns or growth centers in rural areas. As of June, 1973, the federal government had committed upwards of \$250 million to fourteen new towns scattered throughout the United States (Table 1). Unfortunately, no justification for the selection of sites or the approval of plans has been forthcoming.⁴³

The new towns program in the United States will be judged in several ways. First, by the extent to which it serves the poor and the disadvantaged.

Table 1 Summary of New Towns Approved and Subsidized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

<i>Community</i>	<i>Projected Population</i>	<i>Projected Jobs</i>	<i>Dwelling Units</i>	<i>Per Cent of Housing for Low and Moderate Income Families</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Date and Amount HUD Guarantee Commitment (in thousands)</i>
Jonathan, Minn.	49,996	18,152	5,500 in 10 years	25	20 mi. SW of Minneapolis	21,000 2/70
St. Charles Communities, Md.	79,145	14,890	25,000 in 20 years	20	25 mi. SE of Wash., D.C.	24,000 6/70
Park Forest South, Ill.	110,000	N.A.	35,000 in 15 years	16	30 mi. S of Chicago	30,000 6/70
Flower Mound, Tex.	64,141	16,454	18,000 in 20 years	20	20 mi. NW of Dallas	18,000 12/70
Maumelle, Ark.	45,000	N.A.	14,000 in 20 years	23	12 mi. NW of Little Rock	7,500 12/70
Cedar-Riverside, Minn.	31,250	14,809	12,500 in 20 years	44	downtown Minneapolis	24,000 6/71
Riverton, N.Y.	25,632	11,180	8,000 in 16 years	40	10 mi. S of Rochester	12,000 12/71
San Antonio Ranch, Tex.	87,972	17,990	28,000 in 30 years	35	20 mi. NW of San Antonio	18,000 2/72
Woodlands, Tex.	150,000	40,000	49,160 in 20 years	27	30 mi. NW of Houston	50,000 4/72
Gananda, N.Y.	55,808	12,890	17,200 in 20 years	21	12 mi. N of Rochester	22,000 4/72
Soul City, N.C.	44,000	18,000	12,096 in 30 years	37	45 mi. NW of Raleigh-Durham	14,000 6/72
Lysander, N.Y.	18,355	N.A.	5,000 in 20 years	50	12 mi. NW of Syracuse	•
Harbinson, S.C.	21,343	6,100	6,500 in 20 years	35	8 mi. NW of Columbia	13,000 10/72
Welfare Is., N.Y.	17,000	7,500	5,000	55	East River between Manhattan and Queens, N.Y.C.	†

Source: Office of New Communities Development, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, as of January, 1973.

• Funded by the New York State Urban Development Corp., approved by HUD June, 1972.

† Funded by the New York State Urban Development Corp., approved by HUD December, 1972.

The fourteen new towns approved thus far (with a population of 800,000 projected over the next thirty years) are scheduled to provide roughly 65,000 units of housing for families with low and moderate incomes. Of the 200,000 new jobs likely to be created, it is not clear what proportion will be accessible to those who are currently unemployed or unskilled. Another measure of success will be the extent to which the new towns can link to recuperative efforts in the central city. Few new towns approved to date have been designed to revitalize decaying central city areas. A third, and probably the most important test of the new towns program, will be whether or not the planners are able to discover appropriate techniques for re-creating social networks and stimulating positive social interaction at something approximating a neighborhood level. Will it be possible to develop more sophisticated theories grounded in a better understanding of social dynamics at the community level? Although lip service has been given to the notion of technological innovation, almost no attention has been paid to the problems and prospects of serious social experimentation.

New communities provide special opportunities for social learning.⁴⁴ Although discussions have centered around the possibility of testing new technological hardware, new waste control systems, industrialized housing and other building systems, and new modes of transportation, the potential for deploying sophisticated technology is not the central issue. Important as such innovations may seem, it is the process of managing social and economic development that requires special attention. New towns can provide an opportunity to study the process of working back and forth between what is desirable and what is feasible. It is at this nexus that planners and sociologists can collaborate in interesting and important ways.

Two decisions usually made early in the planning process have an almost irreversible impact upon the ultimate character of a community: the selection of a site and the amount and nature of the financing commitment. Experiments might be aimed at opening up these decisions to the ultimate users who, quite literally, have to live with the consequences. It might be possible, for instance, to identify the potential users of a new town so that they could help design the community before a final decision on site selection was made. The planners of Soul City have considered ways of identifying prospective residents so that they can be involved in the initial planning stages.⁴⁵ If this is too difficult, consultants and advisors might be selected whose interests are similar to those likely to live in the new town. (One word of warning here: involvement of surrogate users must go beyond the traditional market survey; they must have a part in generating the range of options as well as evaluating specific alternatives.) Either strategy should yield much needed information on social service preferences and the extent to which different groups will cluster when given the opportunity.

Another useful strategy would be to defer as many decisions as possible which affect the form of development until residents are on the scene. Indeed, the initial development might include temporary quarters for residents (short-term rentals) while they become directly involved in planning activities. Designs might be sought which break down what are presently large capital investments such as sewer and road systems into smaller components which may (or may not) be added incrementally, thereby avoiding long-term commitments to an overall physical form.

Still another possible approach might be to build several smaller neighborhoods simultaneously, so that each could offer very different combinations of site and cash flow characteristics. Neighborhoods which are deliberately planned to grow slowly (temporary users might be allowed to pay for the carrying costs of the land) might be paired with others which are planned to grow as rapidly as possible. Financing commitments might vary accordingly. These suggestions imply great flexibility in holding open site and cash flow arrangements—flexibility which only government backing can help to ensure. In each case it should be possible to adjust physical designs to respond to emerging activity patterns and to learn more about the processes by which neighborhood groups sort themselves out.

The development of more permanent institutions in a new community provides another opportunity for experimentation. Preventive health care on a community scale (as in Columbia, Maryland) and prepaid group practice arrangements might become a major part of a plan for the delivery of health services. Various ownership formats—condominiums, cooperatives, etc.—and other mechanisms for local control could be tested along with institutional innovations such as:

Small quasigovernmental units. Can control over services traditionally provided by city-wide governments be dispersed to small groups of residents or to neighborhood associations? What are the effects of disaggregation?

Special service districts or corporations. Can local development corporations be designed to control the delivery of services? Can debt repayment be transferred from the developer to the community or service districts in small increments?

Crisis management. Can better ways be found of raising issues of community concern, disseminating information, and resolving conflict through neighborhood forums, ombudsmen, or new forms of media, particularly cable television?

From experiments such as these it should be possible to discover which forms of community organization provide adequate support for new-

comers and which contribute most to the satisfaction of various resident groups.

Most, if not all of these experiments presume that social researchers will be able and willing to evaluate the process of new town development. New towns are obviously more conducive to this kind of research than established neighborhoods. Reactions to continuous probing are likely to be less severe in a new town than in an established inner city area. Moreover, developers often make it clear from the outset that part of the price of living in a new town will be a continuous bombardment of surveys and questionnaires. Participant observers can move into a new town somewhat less obtrusively. The most important difference, however, is that the evolution of social arrangements in a new town is relatively transparent whereas in older neighborhoods, successive waves of immigration, the interplay of impinging pressures from nearby communities, and the time-bound hierarchy of residency make it difficult to study the *process* of social transformation.

Experiments in new town design are different from experiments in the physical sciences in at least three ways: the large number of variables involved in any situation makes it virtually impossible to undertake classical matched-pair experiments; "scaling up" may change the nature of the problem and invalidate the results of a pilot experiment, and since humans are involved, successes and failures are always relative and subjective concepts.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, experiments in institutional design and the study of their subsequent impact on social organization are an absolutely necessary step in building more sophisticated theories of new town planning.

A rigorous monitoring system is also a prerequisite for learning from new town experiments. Monitoring should indicate the performance of the community at the local level, where feedback will allow for frequent adjustments, and at the national level where alternative new town development strategies can be evaluated. Since communities take years to develop, long-term recording of events, perceptions, and changes will be required. The process of research should begin with each initial participant in the development process recording his or her expectations: designers ought to spell out the various opportunities they envision for each new town, and investors ought to be specific about profit expectations. Monitoring should include the periodic collection of photographic, visual, and verbal records of the community, and an archivist should be designated to collect and hold impressions and records in every new town.

What has been missing is a sense that we know what community life should be like—for one or for all segments of the population. Unfortunately, we do not. To the extent that new towns start out representing different models of social and economic activity, they provide an opportunity to gauge the probable reactions of various population groups. Most

attempts to construct social experiments have failed; partly because the risks involved are great and partly because planners and social scientists have been too timid to suggest such large-scale ventures. New towns can change all that, first, because no one need be an unwitting captive of a new town experiment and second, because the climate is obviously ripe for such bold adventures. We need to advance our understanding about possible ways of improving the quality of community life. The burden is now on the shoulders of those who have hidden behind the protective covering of descriptive research. Much as they despise the thought, there is no way to avoid the need for policy-oriented or prescriptive experimental research.

New town planners may well be guilty of replacing one illusion with another. A fresh start will not necessarily produce better results, especially if no one is clear about what he is striving for. The only way to reduce the chance of failure is to develop a better process of social learning. In so far as new town development is concerned, experimentation might help to generate a clearer perception of the real value of alternative new town designs. This is an effort, though, that will require an input from planners whose implicit social theories are rarely grounded in systematic research and from community sociologists who have often failed to focus on the process of social change. If the two professions are unable to work in tandem the gap between theory and practice is likely to become even wider.

NOTES

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