New Town: We Can Learn From This British Venture

Chester Smolski

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski_text

Part of the Physical and Environmental Geography Commons, Urban, Community and Regional Planning Commons, and the Urban Studies and Planning Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Chester Smolski Collection at Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Smolski Texts by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ric.edu.
New Town

We can learn from this British venture

by CHESTER E. SMOKHT

Special to the Sunday Journal

IN 1946 when Lewis Silkin, Minister of Housing, approached Stevenage, then a village of about 6,000 residents 33 miles north of London in the lovely rolling Hertfordshire countryside, he must have suspected that the villagers were not particularly anxious to hear him speak. The signs in the railway station had been changed to Simington by some of the dispossessed villagers before he was able to leave the town of his own accord and find some quiet in the rural town. Stevenage was the first "new town" designated under the New Towns Act of 1946 and the Minister was there to tell the villagers what this would mean for them.

The thought of having newly农村 Londoners dropped like their fruit gourds did not sit well with the Stevenage residents, for they had had a previous experience during the war when Londoners were evacuated and then settled in at Stevenage. The villagers were happy when the Londoners returned home. But now Lewis Silkin was there to speak.

The Minister made it very clear when he said: "Like it or not, the people of London need somewhere to live and work. We have decided that Stevenage will be the first New Town, and the first New Town it will be...." Shouts of "Dictator" and "Genoese" from the crowd made it even more obvious that the residents were not at all happy at being on the beginning of what some take to be the biggest housing development movement and one of the biggest ever to be attempted in the world. The wholesale building of complete new towns with their own streets, shops, schools, hospitals, and swimming baths, with the odd fruit trees thrown in, is not the first time this has been attempted. Today, more than 4,500 villagers since each year from about 1,100 families move into Stevenage and take pictures of Britain's first new, present-day town.

It was our good fortune to live three years after. A month of looking for housing in London, it became quite obvious why there are about 100,000 families on the London Council housing list who are in need of homes. We were not in a position to wait eight or ten years for a house in London, as some families do, because we were hooded and could appreciate the feeling. Imagine a town in which people are able to go home for lunch from their factories, and that they do in large numbers. It is possible to change jobs after moving to Stevenage. Imagine a position back in London. The answer is yes, and home tenants do—but less than two per cent of the workforce who have chosen to remain in their town and work there as well.

In the early days of new-town development, however, never was any of the families living in the same place and having to make provisions for the children’s education and the general requirement for housing. To be sure, it was not the type of new town designed for everyone—families who have been built on for this reason, and the very best suburban communities in this country. For this to happen, it is important that there is an awareness of what a new town is, a commitment to do something about our own housing shortage, and an increased role of government in providing the money to foster this type of town development. Many of our traditions have come from Britain and they appear that we can learn from that country's experience, even in this, the richest country of the world.

Chester Smokht is an associate professor of geography at Rhode Island College.