New Town: We Can Learn From This British Venture

Chester Smolski

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New Town

We can learn from this British venture

by CHESTER E. SMOLSKI
(Special to the Sunday Journal)

IN 1946 when Lewis Silkin, Minister of Housing, approached Stevenage, then a quiet village of about 6,900 residents 30 miles north of London in the lovely rolling Hertfordshire country, he must have suspected that the villagers were not particularly anxious to bear him apathy. The signs in the railway stations had been changed to Blikbogby by some of the disgruntled villagers and before he was to leave he found the tons of his ear defaced and some sort of the period took. 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 nearly 100,000 Londoners dropped into their front gardens did not sit well with the Stevenage residents, for they had had a previous experience during the war when Luftnahmen were evacuated and then settled in Stevenage. The villagers were happy when the Londoners returned home, but now they saw them as "enemies again.

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. Shorts of "Diktator" and "Degenpe" from the crowd made it even more obvious that the residents were not at all happy at being on the beginning of what was later to become Britain's biggest housing development movement and unceasing in the world: the wholesale building of complete new towns with their own schools, shops, homes, industries, and cultural life. The people were to be their own masters.

Today, more than 6,900 villagers come each year from across the country to Stevenage and take pictures of Britain's first new, pattern town.

It was our good fortune to live there last year. 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 10 years for a house in London, as some families do, because we were in England for only about a year. Then the most brightly welcomed news that the Stevenage Development Corporation, the government-established organization which builds and runs the town until the town is able to do so itself, had a house available for us for low rent. We were of the country, such as Reston, Virginia, or the villages in the U.S., where the lowest-priced house available sells for more than $20,000. Rather, a Stevenage style new town, whose families of all incomes can live and enjoy the amenities generally found only in the very best suburban communities in this country. For this to happen, it is necessary that there be an awareness of what a new town is, a commitment to do something about our own housing shortage, and an increased sense of government in providing the money to foster this type of town development. Many of our traditions have come from Britain and it appears that we can learn from that country's experience, even in this, the richest country of the world.

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

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TOWN CENTER, left, is laid out for pedestrians' convenience. At right, Mr. Smolski and his family at their Stevenage residence.

"BACK YARD" In this part of Stevenage is only a small forced area and a garage, but open-country—like everything else—in easy walking distance of homes.

"BED" and "Degenpe" signs were changed to "Diktator" and "Degenpe" from the crowd made it even more obvious that the residents were not at all happy at being on the beginning of what was later to become Britain's biggest housing development movement and unceasing in the world: the wholesale building of complete new towns with their own schools, shops, homes, industries, and cultural life. The people were to be their own masters.

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