

Hubert-Jan Henket & Hilde Heynen, eds. *Back from Utopia : The Challenge of the Modern Movement*, 2002

The completely new, planned town was one of the most potent symbols of the 'high' Modern Movement in the mid-20th century. For example, leafing through the 1200-page *Encyclopaedia of Urban Planning* compendium published by McGraw-Hill in 1974 and written by a vast, multi-national authorial team, one finds country after country proudly presenting projects for new settlements laid out on rationalist MoMo lines with plentiful light and air, zoned segregation of uses, and *Zeilenbau* layouts of slab blocks of mass housing and offices in free-space parallel or rectilinear arrangements. These settlements varied in size, prestige and politico-economics from the new capital of Brasilia down to the more mundane industrial towns built by communist regimes, but they all had in common a recognizably Modern Movement spatial form, and a special focus on the building of 'community', as an aspect of the wider pursuit of Progress, through provision of housing and other social building programmes. In 'Western' countries, those patterns were already by 1974 beginning their precipitous fall from fashion – a fall in which new town building was accompanied by modernist architecture and mass social housing. Today, the architectural fortunes of 'modernist style' have revived once again, but in a socio-economic context of rampant capitalist commodification that seems wildly different from any aspect of the disciplined, collective mid-20th-century years.

So how, if at all, can this phase of prodigious effort in new town building be relevant to us today in the 21st century? In my answer, I'd like to make a sharp distinction between two types of town building. On the one hand, there's the specific circumstances and formal 'vocabulary' of the mid-20th-century Modern Movement new towns – dominated by the wartime state and its ideals of collective order and social provision of 'homes for heroes', 'schools for heroes', 'hospitals for heroes', and so on. All these features and aspects are well known, and so I will only deal with them in passing in this paper. On the other hand, there's the far longer history of planned settlement in general – one which continues to the present day. In this short article, I focus on that wider tradition, arguing that while the specific circumstances and forms of mid-20th-century modernism may be gone for good, the longer, broader tradition of 'planning vs. chaos' – within which the 'new town' is just one of a number of interconnected elements – continues to be of relevance and value to us today.

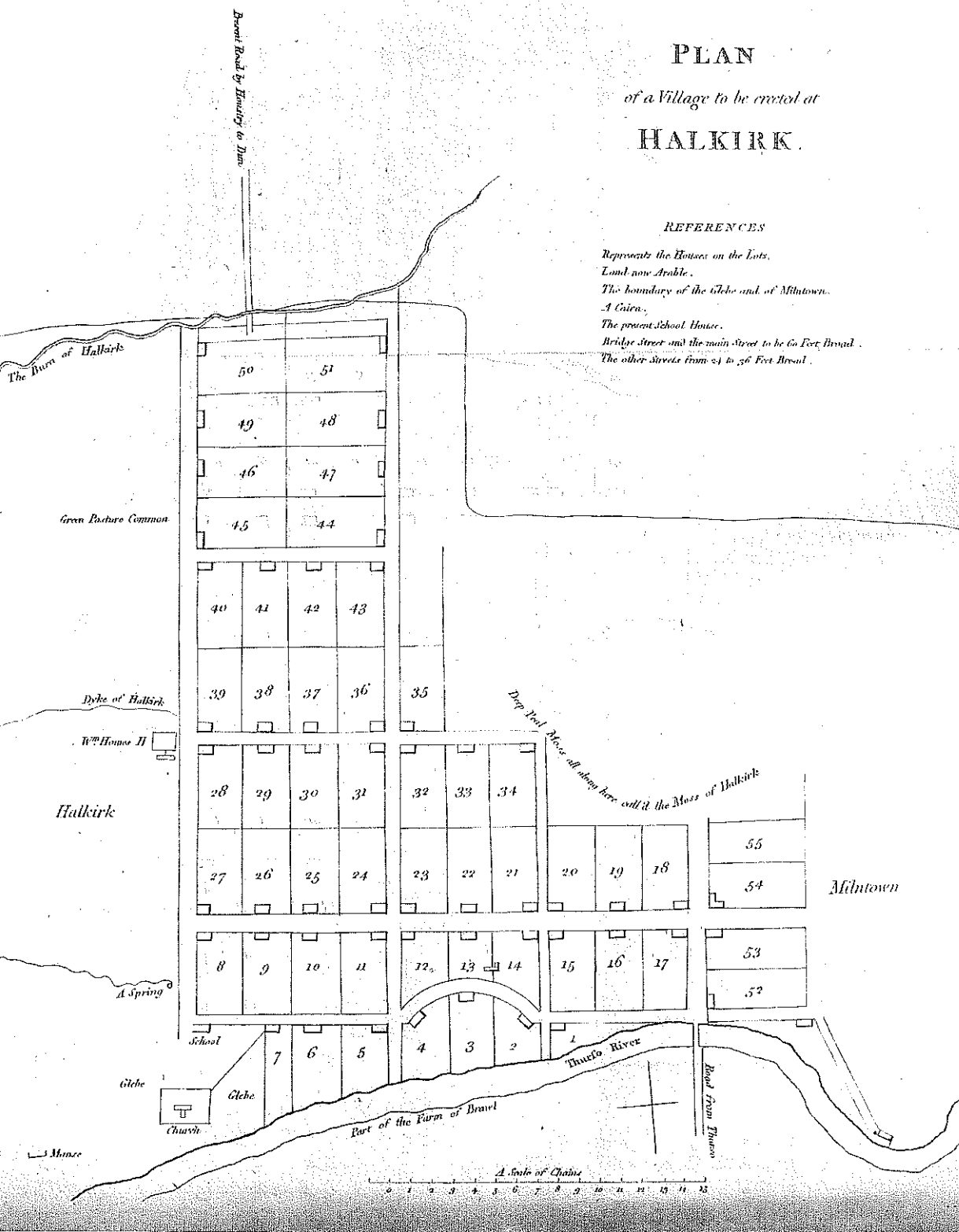
The tradition of building new towns in a regularized, planned form, especially involving rectilinear grid plan layouts, has been a continuous one in Europe and China for just over 2000 years. In China, the tradition stemmed chiefly from metaphysical ideas – the concept that the earth was square and heaven round – whereas in Greece and Rome, there was a closer relation between the plantation of gridiron settlements and imperial and military expansion. We all know about the activities of the Romans in founding countless encampments that later developed into proper towns, but that trend continued into the

Plan of Halkirk, one of the 18th-century examples of the rationally planned farm complexes and new industrial villages by the pioneering agricultural-reform 'Improvement' movement.

PLAN of a Village to be erected at HALKIRK.

REFERENCES

- Represents the Houses on the Lots.
- Land now Arable.
- The boundary of the Glebe and of Milntown.
- A Calva.
- The present School House.
- Bridge Street and the main Street to be 60 Feet Broad.
- The other Streets from 24 to 36 Feet Broad.



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Middle Ages: for example, King Edward I of England founded around a dozen fortified, grid plan 'bastides' in Wales and over 70 in Gascony. And in Ireland, Scots and English people together began the planned, urbanized plantation of Ulster, with grid plans like that of 1622 for 'London-Derry'. With the growth of British colonies in America and elsewhere, the same ideas were expanded in scope, and began to influence planning back 'home' – for example, in James Craig's Edinburgh New Town plan of 1766/7, a semi-autonomous residential suburb, designed to exclude the lower orders. Partly, these plans reflected the utopian ideals of writers such as Fourier and Owen; but rectangular-planned new towns were also founded throughout Europe and North America during the late 18th and 19th centuries for a host of practical, commercial reasons, as part of agricultural reform or industrial development.

What gradually began to emerge in the imperialist European countries, 'at home' and 'overseas', was a close interrelation between the tabula-rasa 'new town' and the stigmatized, muddled 'old town': the uniform classical facades of the 18th-century Edinburgh New Town, for example, directly confronted the ramshackle Old Town and castle. 'New towns' were not seen as an idea in isolation. Rather, they sat alongside a policy of radical, surgical 'redevelopment' of the old, muddled environments, as another branch of the same tree. In the pioneering agricultural-reform 'Improvement' movement of the late 18th century in England and Scotland, the building of rationally-planned farm complexes and new industrial villages was bound up with the liquidation of the old, semi-communal farming 'townships', built of turf and other impermanent materials.

This desire to bring order to 'chaos' also had a side that is unacceptable from our present-day, post-colonial viewpoint: increasingly, colonial settlement planning became influenced by concepts of moral and medical hygiene, closely parallel to those being developed at home to deal with industrial slum conditions by new professional groups, such as sanitary engineers and public-health doctors. One outcome of the classification preoccupations of 19th-century utilitarianism was the racial and hygienist zoning of colonial cities. But unlike the 20th-century South African 'locations' or townships, under British colonial schemes in India it was the whites who were segregated away, in encampment-style cantonments or 'civil lines' separated from 'native' areas by a building-free open zone and controlled by an administrative code which was distinct from municipal government – a tradition of defensive segregation through planned settlement which culminated in the foundation of New Delhi in 1912 in its enclave of 1290 square miles.

In parallel with, or even before the beginnings of 19th-century slum-clearance at home, large-scale gridiron redevelopments of older cities in the colonies were undertaken, to open them up to ventilation and military surveillance. The Scottish engineer Robert Napier, later Lord Napier of Magdala, masterminded a vast replanning programme from 1857 in the wake of the 'Indian Mutiny' uprising, involving the creation of new European cantonments and the radical redevelopments of the old towns of Lucknow and Delhi by cutting through wide boulevards. And 'Improvement Trusts' modelled on the British domestic pattern began work across the British Empire (beginning in 1889 in Mumbai/

Bombay). These focused on slum clearance and clearing wide road swathes, and on building more 'sanitary' dwellings. Here we are not dealing with anything approaching 'homes fit for heroes', but semi-communal barrack housing or native 'lines', or in the denser conditions of Bombay and Calcutta, the 'chawl', a tenement building of up to five storeys, with single rooms off verandas or corridors.

Thus, by the early 20th century, the building of 'new towns' was part of a complex tradition which blended elements of idealism and practical realism, coercion and emancipation, 'good' and 'bad' (from our present-day perspective). All that the 20th century brought, arguably, was the new formal vocabulary of Modern Movement urbanism, in its various permutations, and a new political-economic context, in the form of the warlike ideals of national mobilization, 'strategic dispersal', and mass social provision – above all through state coordination of housing. The new and more disciplined attitude to the built environment originated in the field of housing reform, where a new field of low-rent social housing directed by state bureaucrats and professional experts was carved out at the expense of the old small private landlords. But gradually there was a stepping up in the scale of discipline, a shift to the broader concepts called 'town planning' or just 'planning'. In the work of pioneering early 20th-century town planners such as Patrick Abercrombie, we see a very strong two-way influence at work, between colonial experience and planning at 'home'. The colonial cantonment or the Australian/American low density settler town was reflected in the idea of the new town separated from the old, dirty sinful city by a green belt; and the colonial redevelopment improvement trusts were reflected in the accelerating clearances of old industrial towns from the 1950s onwards.

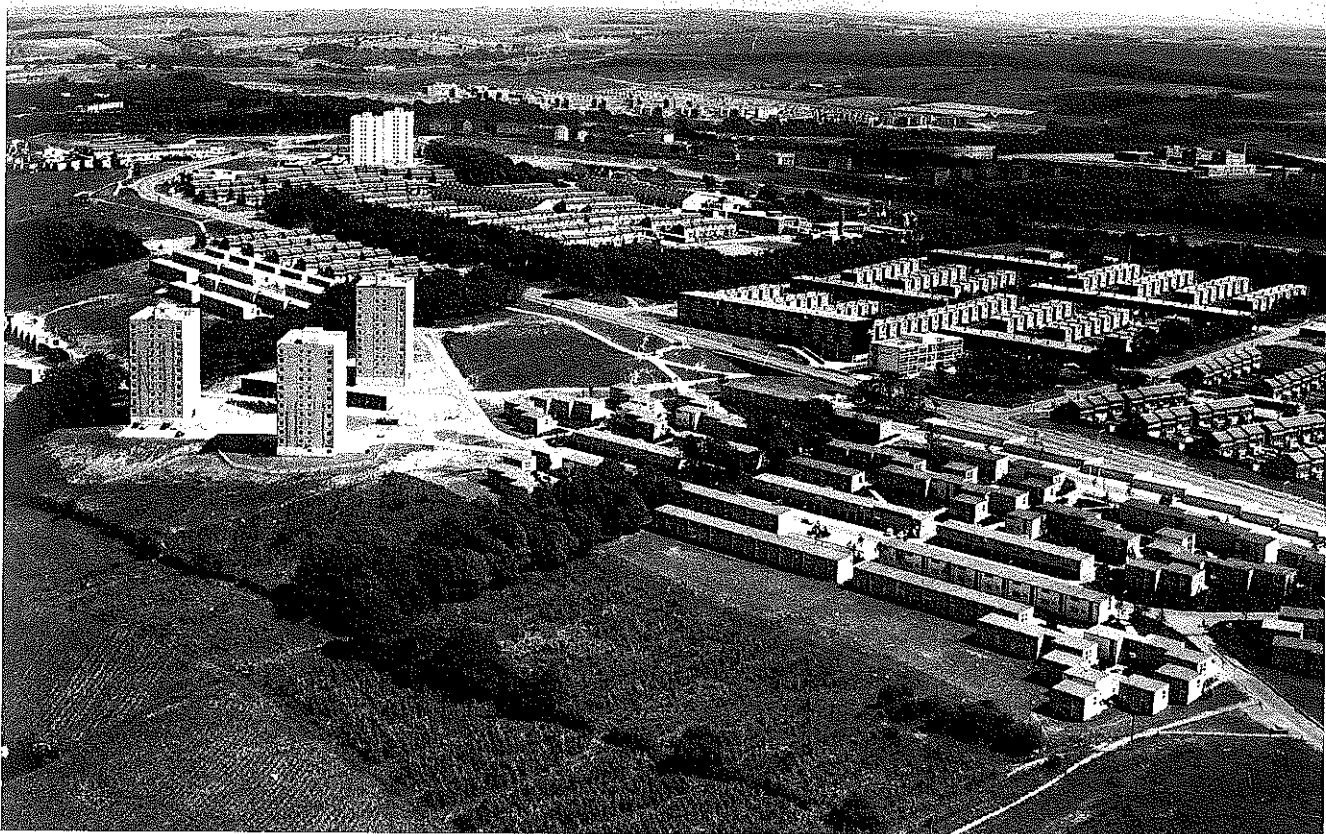
Many, if not most, of the new towns of the 20th century still originated from relatively utilitarian economic or industrial motives, and were little different from 19th-century 'company towns', even if their 'style' was increasingly influenced by the Modern Movement. In the United States, for example, a string of planned company towns was founded, beginning with Pullman, Illinois (1880); by 1927 planner John Nolen could report that there existed over 35 new towns and garden cities. The mid-20th-century wartime years saw a series of military-related settlements, such as the Atomic Energy Commission's foundations at Oak Ridge, Richland and Los Alamos, and the Colorado Springs town designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill for the US Air Force Academy. In the Soviet bloc countries, an essentially similar approach continued throughout the Brezhnev years of the 1970s and early 80s, with a vast output of completely new industrial towns and settlements, built of standard flats in industrialized concrete panel construction, with formal, spacious planning along grand axes, owing as much to the Beaux-Arts tradition as to the Modern Movement.

But even many of the 'classic' Modern Movement new towns, stemming from social-democratic state planning initiatives, and dominated by relatively lavish public housing laid out on 'neighbourhood unit' lines, were still closely bound up with the older traditions of town plantation. In this context, even within the 20th century, the 'uniqueness' of the Modern New Town fragments still further when seen in historical retrospect.

In Central Scotland, for example, the 'slum problem' of Glasgow was tackled by the familiar combination of new settlement and redevelopment solutions. On the one hand, there was to be mass overspill to colony-like New Towns, beginning with East Kilbride (from 1948), planned on text-book neighbourhood unit lines. On the other, there was radical surgical reconstruction within Glasgow, including 29 extensive 'comprehensive development areas'. The centrepiece of this approach was the Clyde Valley Regional Plan, prepared in 1944-6 by Abercrombie. He clashed forcibly with local political interests represented by Glasgow Corporation, who wanted a more piecemeal approach to dealing with the city's slums, one that kept its population in place rather than shipping it off to New Towns. The organization of the Scottish and British New Towns, with their non-elected boards and powers to override local county authorities, was distinctly colonial in character. This contrasted strongly with the local city councils in places like Glasgow, whose drive to build tower blocks to 'give the people homes' was motivated by urgent, emotional local-political pressure from slum-dwellers. But the local municipalities, with their own wide housing and planning powers, were also affected in some ways by the same dirigiste ethos as the New Towns. For example, while many of the general managers of the New Town Development Corporations actually had colonial backgrounds, so also did some key bureaucrats in the municipalities, who gave shape to the politically driven urban 'housing crusades'.

Now by this time, by the mid-20th century, the old warlike, disciplined culture of control and exclusion was becoming transformed gradually into something more emancipatory and inclusive. Imperial ideologists like John Buchan began to talk of empire as a trusteeship, as a vehicle for peace related to the League of Nations, and in colonial city planning the concept of the cantonment was replaced by that of the dual city, in which the indigenous settlements would be left free to develop in their own way. At home, turn of century commentators such as Patrick Geddes had already begun to place an increasing value on the historic heritage and on the need for a more sensitive or spiritual approach in the built environment. He believed that confrontational or domineering planning policies could only foment discord and even war, and held that the urbanism of control had to reform to survive. The second new town built for Glasgow, Cumbernauld (from 1955), tried to reflect something of the density and hubbub of the 'traditional older city' by abandoning rigidly zone-separated uses and housing areas in favour of a more mixed-together approach.

From around the 1970s, the full-blown modernist new town conception went into retreat in the 'Western' countries, along with the more invasive planning techniques of urban redevelopment and the popular demand for mass social housebuilding. These environments now themselves became, in effect, the tattered 'old town' against which new development measured itself. But that new building was dominated now not by state command building, but by a more laissez-faire, capitalist ethos. In this context, the need for 'planning' of some sort has become more vital than ever – but the appropriate response will vary between different societies, and only sometimes will involve the creation of



Aerial view of the second new town built for Glasgow, Cumbernauld (from 1955), showing the combination of dense planning and the avoidance of excessively rigid segregation of zoning, while maintaining a high level of road infrastructure.

complete new towns. In European countries, the fight-back has to be a subtle one, as the enemy is insidious, its homogenizing commercialism concealed behind the illusory diversity of the 'mixed use urban realm'. In East Asia, the situation is quite different, with capitalist development taking the form of an aggressively rampant anarchy, especially on the territory of supposedly 'socialist' China. In his 'Project on the City', Rem Koolhaas argues polemically that this 'city of exacerbated difference', in the extreme speed of its spread, and in its calculated flouting of any balance and harmony, is something quite unprecedented in the history of the city. In reality, although the scale is different and the style is superficially 'modernist', there is little qualitative difference between these 'mega-cities' and the industrial 'Coketowns' of the 19th century.

This extreme formula undoubtedly suggests a radical response. Accordingly, something approaching the Modernist New Town formula, compressed into a much more dense form and emphasizing the more authoritarian aspects of state command planning, has been worked out and implemented on a vast scale by the governments of the sup-



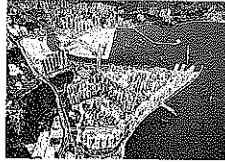
Toa Payoh, one of the densely clustered network of New Towns built in the late 20th century by the city-state government of Singapore as part of its huge housing drive.

Map showing the New Area and New Town Development in Hong Kong.



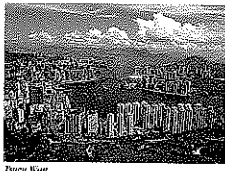
Tin Shui Wai

天水圍



Tuen Mun

屯門



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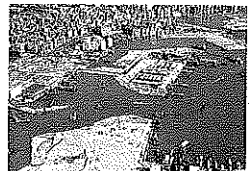
Tung Chung and Chek Lap Kok Airport

東涌及赤鱗角機場



Yuen Long

元朗



West Kowloon Reclamation

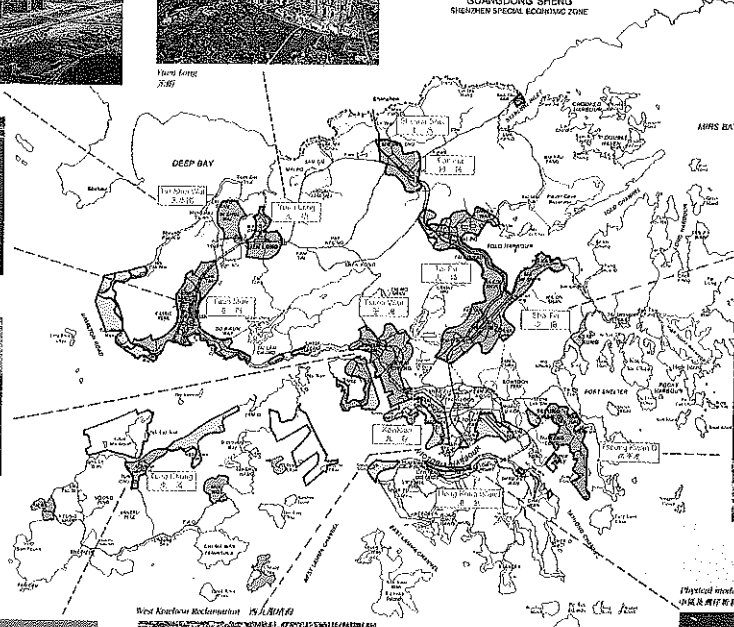
西九龍新填地

Urban Area and New Town Development

市區及新市鎮發展

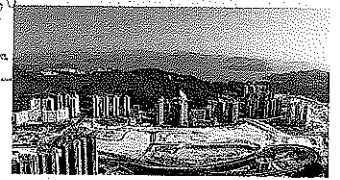
廣東省
GUANGDONG SHENG
SHENZHEN SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE

New Towns / 新市鎮
New Development Area / 新發展區



Sha Tin by night

沙田夜景



Tuen Mun

屯門

Physical model of Grand and Wanchai Development

中環及灣仔新發展區模型



Hong Kong Government
Territory Development Department
香港政府發展局
1993

posedly hyper-capitalist statelets of Hong Kong and Singapore. In the remainder of this article, we will look at this strategy in a little more detail, as a way of showing that the New Town tradition is still alive and well, ready for use when needed.

These incredible programmes began after the Second World War, when the credibility of European imperialism in the east had been shattered by the Japanese. Immediately afterwards, Hong Kong and Singapore, both classic British colonial entrepot port enclaves, with largely Chinese populations, were overshadowed by insurgencies or ethnic divisions, and were overrun by vast waves of refugees. Over the period of the 1940s–1960s, the British embarked on two somewhat different decolonization strategies.

Singapore was decolonized directly as part of the Malayan federation, and eventually split off in the mid-1960s as an independent statelet under the authoritarian rule of the People's Action Party, led by Lee Kwan Yew. Hong Kong was kept under British occupation for several more decades, insulating it as a capitalist enclave from the Communist instability in the rest of China. It was the British who began, or were compelled to begin, a process of behind-the-scenes decolonization, which would set up Hong Kong as an autonomous cultural unit that could be reunited in due course with a more stable China. In both cases, the administrative method used was basically the same, namely, a dirigiste 19th-century ethos of colonial development, modified by selective instruments of 20th-century European welfare-statism – including, above all, the role of town and country planning, and mass social housing.

Which brings us directly to the built environment, and to the Modern Movement. But not only to the Modern Movement: because the architectural form of the vast programmes of public housing and planned settlement which began in both territories from the early 1950s was not simply a reflection, or an inflation, of European modernist forms, but also an organic development of older colonial and Chinese patterns. The early public housing drive in Hong Kong featured, from the beginning, very strong influences of the modernist concept of the block of apartments with internal modern facilities, and access to light and air. But there were also equally strong overtones of extended-family habitation and the mixture of commercial and domestic. Due to the shortage of land and the demographic pressures, the Housing Authority and Resettlement estates were much denser than anything in European modernism (at up to 3000 persons per acre). This density allowed a level of communal and commercial services which was beyond the wildest dreams of European social utopians, in the case of the planned, high-class estates, and beyond their worst nightmares, in the case of the unplanned shacks which sprang up around the resettlement schemes.

A further aspect of the Asian cultural context of Singapore and Hong Kong public housing is the cross-fertilization between the two. The most dramatic example of this has been the policy of turning multi-storey public housing into a vehicle of mass home ownership, to help settle in the refugee populations. This was invented in Singapore by Lee Kwan Yew, who began a system which allowed compulsory social-insurance levies to be turned into mortgages. Within a quarter of a century, 85% of the Singapore population

were living in owner-occupied high-rise public housing blocks. Then, from the mid-1970s, the policy has been copied in Hong Kong, in the Home Ownership Scheme (HOS): the Housing Authority has built, for sale, vast numbers of flats in tower blocks of 30–40 storeys – higher than the relatively modest-scale developments in Singapore. This association of mass state housing and home ownership, in Chinese-dominated city-states, could be argued to have, so far, realized the classless aspirations of 1920s European modernism better than the mid-20th-century mass programmes of European public housing – although its viability in Asia is now under severe threat from the recent economic crises.

It was not only in the policies and the forms of housing, but also in the overall concepts of the city that the legacy of international modernism interacted with Chinese and colonialist cultural influences. The decision was taken after independence in Singapore, and in the early 1970s in Hong Kong, to apply the technologies of modernist regional planning, and in particular the concept of decentralized new settlements or new towns, to the reshaping of their territories. In Hong Kong, by integrating the part supposedly ceded to Britain in perpetuity with the part that was ‘on lease’, the decolonization of the whole territory when the lease expired in 1997 became inevitable. Regional planning in Hong Kong set the clock loudly ticking towards 1997, but at the same time held out the hope of creating a place with its own roots and identity, distinct from the more anarchic patterns of urban growth across the border in the Shenzhen special zone.

As implemented in Hong Kong, the regional planning concept owed rather more to post-war European modernism than to colonial settlement patterns. It was linked especially to the later phase of modernist planning from the 1950s, to the reaction away from the functionally segregated new town towards more densely nucleated forms and overlapping uses: the first completely new town in Hong Kong, Sha Tin, developed from the mid-1970s to the mid-90s, is similar in its clustered and rather linear layout to 1950s/60s Cumbernauld, with its megastructure centre and its sharp juxtaposition with surrounding hills. But in the sheer intensity and scale of cluster building in Hong Kong, something new was created, deriving from Chinese rather than European urban culture. Even the most dense Western new towns could not attain the critical mass of density to overcome functional segregation, and make possible an environment which catered for rising expectations of personal living space, yet which integrated people’s homes with other uses: in Britain, for example, dense concentrations of high tower blocks were confined to urban developments by the city councils (many of them bitterly opposed to new towns and population ‘overspill’). Even today, with all the urbanist talk in Europe of ‘mixed use’ and the ‘dense urban village’, most built attempts at that ideal still generally look almost absurdly low-density by comparison. Even in Singapore, with its less urgent pressures of demography, the new towns are relatively spacious. In Hong Kong’s new towns, and in its redevelopments in the existing fabric, a truly social modernism is the everyday norm. Every large new housing project consists of tower flats with a large megastructural centre of commerce and public transport. These homes are unambiguously Modern dwellings, set apart in their self-containment, order and modernity from the old, muddled collectivity of the

Resettlement barrack blocks and the new muddled privatism of the Shenzhen mushroom towns; yet they have all the commercial and community possibilities of city life on their doorstep.

Thus the social ethos of 'new town' building is not narrowly specific to Europe or to the 'heroic modernist' past, but something that can spring up in other places, in response to new challenges. What matters is not the specific forms of modernist 'style' but the determination to proceed according to a plan, and to restrain the worst excesses of 'free market' chaos. The circumstances that sparked off the Hong Kong and Singapore city-state reconstructions are now passing into history, like those of the European 'mass' building 'drives' before them. We cannot yet predict where and in what form the next burst of 'new town' building will erupt – but we know it is only a matter of time before it does!

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