

TOWARDS CRAIGAVON: THE ‘NEW CITY’ IN COUNTY ARMAGH IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT*¹

The historical context to the creation of Craigavon in the 1960s is intimately related to the changing dynamics of the principal urban area in Northern Ireland and the priorities identified by politicians and policymakers within central government in response to the challenges of Belfast’s modernisation. Thus, the New City in County Armagh was initially conceived as a means of addressing the real (and perceived) problems of the Belfast region, utilising techniques already tried-and-tested in Great Britain via the state-led New Town programme. The relationship of Craigavon to Belfast, therefore, is akin to that of Stevenage and Milton Keynes to London, and Cumbernauld and East Kilbride to Glasgow, and its history is ultimately bound up in the larger story of the creation of post war new towns and emergent thinking on strategic planning in the UK. However, Craigavon and other twentieth century new towns also represented the culmination of older ideas derived from utopian thinkers, social reformers and industrial philanthropists, particularly in the nineteenth century, and their back-story can only fully be understood with reference to these earlier influences and influencers. The ‘seers’, as Peter Hall (2002, p.27) labelled the pioneering thinkers on urban planning, could not have envisaged how their ideas would travel, mutate and be implemented differentially over time, and between places, while continuing to retain relevancy into the 21st century.

This article is primarily focused on Craigavon before it became Craigavon. That is, before the New City was named, controversially, in early 1965, and prior to its official designation by the Northern Ireland Government under the New Towns Act (Northern Ireland) in 1965. As such, the article is largely concerned with Craigavon as it remained ‘on the page’ and in the imagination of those who initially proposed it – principally the Scottish architect-planner Robert Matthew and senior civil servants in Stormont, backed by Terence O’Neill. This approach neatly facilitates the bypassing of some of the controversial aspects of its naming and uneven development on the ground. Rather, the article provides historical context beginning with the nineteenth and early-twentieth century development of Model Villages and Garden Cities before focusing on the post-war New Town programme in Great Britain. The second half of the article addresses the advent of regional planning in Northern Ireland and the work of Robert Matthew, whose identification of the area between Portadown and Lurgan set in motion

*Pre-proofed invited article published in *REVIEW: The Journal of Craigavon Historical Society* in May 2017.

the process leading up to Craigavon's official designation in 1965. The initial stages in the New City's development are then discussed, with the ideas and actions of its first Chief Designer, Geoffrey Copcutt, outlined before converging on some of the problems that dogged the project from an early stage.

Model Villages and Garden Cities

The pioneers of the early town planning movement, whose ideas would prove inspirational for new town proponents in the mid-twentieth century, are closely associated with the settlements known as Model Villages and Garden Cities. The former includes such places as Bourneville, outside Birmingham, and Port Sunlight, near Liverpool, respectively developed from the late 1870s (Port Sunlight begun in 1888) by the Quaker and chocolate manufacturer, George Cadbury, and the chemical (and soap) magnate William Lever. The latter category is represented by Letchworth (founded 1903) and Welwyn (founded 1920), both located in the English county of Hertfordshire, whose creation in the early twentieth century was led by one of the most celebrated influences on modern town and country planning, Ebenezer Howard. Model Villages and Garden Cities share many common characteristics, not least the fact that they were deliberately sited in the countryside to avoid the 'evils' of the industrial-era Victorian city and its attendant overcrowding, poor housing conditions, pollution, diseases and other vices – in contrast to the somewhat idealised virtues of a rural existence. Furthermore, the segregation of industrial from residential uses, lower density housing (often designed in a picturesque style), accommodating space for gardens and allotments, and the provision of recreational and other facilities for residents, set within an embryonic 'green belt' of agricultural land, are defining shared characteristics. However, Garden Cities were not intended to function according to the same moral precepts that were at the forefront of the thinking of several Model Village founders concerning, for example, the absence of public houses and pawnshops.

The Garden City ideas promoted by Howard are further distinguished from Model Villages in that they represented a step up in terms of scale, ambition and thinking on how such places could be realised. For instance, Model Villages were essentially one-off settlements created (and initially owned) by industrialists to house workers close to their factories. Thus, the 'social experiment' of Bessbrook in County Armagh, rightly identified by Camblin (1951) as an earlier example than Saltaire in Yorkshire, was built by John Grubb Richardson from the mid-1840s to accommodate workers in his adjacent mill. By contrast, Garden Cities were not tied to

specific industries or industrialists and the private companies established to purchase land and advance their development instead sought to attract both a range of new employers and inhabitants. Furthermore, Garden Cities were conceived within a broader framework of action advocated by the Town and Country Planning Association (initially called the Garden City Association), which Howard established in 1899. In particular, Howard illustrated his ideas and envisaged their realisation on a regional scale, encapsulating the key concepts in the ‘Three Magnets’ (Figure 1) and ‘Social City’ diagrams (Figure 2). The former identifies the advantages and disadvantages of urban and rural life, superimposing the descriptors employed over two magnets, with a third magnate indicating that a new type of settlement – the Garden City – could combine the accessibility and environmental qualities of ‘town-country’. As individual garden cities reached their target population of 30,000 people, Howard proposed that new settlements would be formed nearby, eventually agglomerating into a so-called Social City. Notwithstanding the prescriptive and paternalistic nature of this conception, and the fact that only two Garden Cities were established during his lifetime due to financial pressures, Howard’s ideas attracted influential followers who would transpose his thinking into post-war government policy.

Figure 1: The Three Magnets diagram published in Howard’s *Tomorrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in 1898. This book was republished in 1902 using a different, and better-known, title: *Garden Cities of To-morrow*.

Figure 2: The Social City envisaged by Howard in *Tomorrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Note that this diagram did not feature in the republished version in 1902.

Post-war New Towns

Many of the Garden City ideals found their ultimate expression in the post war years following the establishment of a comprehensive system of town and country planning in the UK. The necessity to rebalance the national economy away from the dominant (and overpopulated) London and the south east of England, in addition to progressing the rebuilding of war-ravaged cities and slum clearance programmes, persuaded politicians to support the construction of new settlements under the 1946 New Towns Act (with separate legislation in Scotland). The eminent architect-planner Patrick Abercrombie, in his Greater London Plan of 1944, had already visualised how a million people could be dispersed from Inner-London and accommodated in

satellite towns, fulfilling, in the words of Hall (2002, p.64), ‘the principles that Ebenezer Howard...established nearly half a century before’. The Minister of Town and Country Planning, Lewis Silkin, swiftly confirmed Stevenage as the first new town under the 1946 Act, and a further thirteen were designated in England and Wales by 1950, including Harlow, Hatfield and Basildon. A key provision of the Act was that state development corporations, with access to long-term loans, be established to plan and build each new town, with the intention that they be wound-up upon completion. Other innovations included the use of experimental designs and building materials, the adoption of the ‘neighbourhood unit’ principle for residential areas, and the pedestrianisation of town centres.

The rollout of new towns in Great Britain did not proceed uncontroversially, however, and certain arguments were aired that would resurface over Craigavon in the 1960s. These ranged from the loss of good agricultural land to low-density housing, the initial failure to create a sense of community resulting in ‘new towns blues’, to the bypassing of local democratic accountability by the new development corporations – local protesters mockingly dubbed Stevenage ‘Silkingrad’ after the government minister. As a consequence of these criticisms and interchanging Conservative and Labour administrations with differing ideological perspectives on the role of the state, the second (smaller) wave of new towns was only designated from the mid-1950s. From the ‘Mark II’ new towns, the denser, linear development of Cumbernauld in central Scotland, is perhaps the best known, particularly for its pioneering centre comprising a single, multi-level, concrete ‘brutalist’ megastructure on stilts above a dual-carriageway (Figure 3). The segregation of vehicular traffic from walkers and cyclists was pioneered in Cumbernauld, with the masterplan more attuned to rising car ownership levels than earlier new town designs. Importantly, from the perspective of Northern Ireland, the ‘flamboyant but highly unstable’ mastermind of Cumbernauld’s town centre, Geoffrey Copcutt, would feature prominently in the early history of the New City in County Armagh (Glendinning, 2008, p.333). Indeed, even when ensconced in Northern Ireland from 1963, Copcutt kept a portable model of Cumbernauld town centre close at hand in his car, and it remained a key reference point for his work on the New City.

Figure 3: An aerial view of Cumbernauld Town Centre. Taken from the JR James Slide Collection under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 license.

Regional Planning in Northern Ireland

Robert Matthew is synonymous with the advent of regional planning in Northern Ireland and his work on the *Belfast Regional Survey and Plan 1962* (Figure 4) informed the selection of a site between Lurgan and Portadown for the New City. Matthew's previous involvement on the Clyde Valley Regional Plan in the 1940s (with Abercrombie), together with the fact that he was a 'Presbyterian Scot', bolstered his commissioning by the Ministry of Health and Local Government in March 1960, in spite of the Unionist Party's previous antipathy towards planning.¹ In appointing Matthew as an independent arbiter, Stormont officials sought to diffuse tensions with Belfast Corporation over the vexed issue of housing, partially through locating the future development of the city within a planned regional context and as a counter-point to the council's repeated requests for a boundary extension. Matthew's recommendations embraced the imposition of a 'stop line' around the urban area to prevent further sprawl while simultaneously protecting the 'green-scape' surrounding the city. Further measures aimed at 'demagnetising' the city – echoing the language first used by Howard in describing his Garden City ideals – included the designation as growth centres of a group of existing towns within a 30-mile radius to accommodate new industries and the 'overspill' population from 'slum clearance'. The most significant proposal, however, was the creation of a New City in County Armagh for 100,000 people by 1981. Crucially, within months of Matthew's recommendations being made public, Terence O'Neill became Prime Minister and swiftly endorsed them as part of his wider agenda to modernise the Northern Ireland economy (in addition to defeating the electoral challenge of the Northern Ireland Labour Party). A New City design team, with Copcutt as Chief Designer, was assembled in skeletal form by late 1963 to press ahead with preliminary proposals, paving the way for the official designation and creation of the Craigavon Development Commission under proposed legislation.

Figure 4: The front cover of the *Belfast Regional Survey and Plan 1962*, published in this format in 1964.

The New City in County Armagh

The appointment of Copcutt occurred somewhat fortuitously, or not, depending on your perspective, with senior figures at Cumbernauld apparently delighted to facilitate his departure elsewhere (Glendinning, 2008). Given the dearth of planners and design professionals in Northern Ireland at the time, it was not surprising that British and international expertise would

be attracted and welcomed to work on the New City project. Although the Design Team had little say over the ultimate location of the New City, Copcutt's pursuit of the principle of linear growth is clearly identifiable in the master plan, whereby communities are located along key communications spines (road, rail networks etc.), with flexibility allowed for further expansion along the spine (Figure 5). In particular, it was envisaged that the 'motor-car city', as Craigavon was intended to become, would incorporate a hierarchical and high-capacity system of roads connected into a regional motorway network, with vehicular traffic within the city totally segregated from pedestrians and cyclists. The *First Report on the Proposed New City* illustrated the key design principles, including zoning into main centres and 'Town Units', with the latter intended to be large enough (16,000-20,000 population at low densities) to support basic social and commercial facilities; to help develop a sense of community; and, to be within reasonable walking distance of the city centre. The initial creation of two Town Units between Portadown and Lurgan would eventually be supplemented by others as the New City gained in popularity – Brownlow was the only unit to be substantially built. However, as proved the case with other large-scale modernist projects of the 1960s, the best intentions of the designers as they imagined the New City conflicted with the somewhat messier reality of implementation.

Figure 5: Outline plan of the New City as envisaged in 1964. Taken from *First Report on the Proposed New City, Co. Armagh*.

Early signs of discontent with the project devastatingly emerged before the First Report was even published, and from an unexpected and high-level source: Copcutt. In a 7,000-word resignation memo sent to the government and main regional newspapers in August 1964, Copcutt critiqued the entire rationale for the New City, which he considered should be abandoned in favour of developing Belfast, Londonderry and other places.² Stormont officials, although publically exuding calm at this stark turn of events, were 'severely rattled' in private (Glendinning, 2008, p.337). Belfast Corporation and others already vehemently opposed to the New City were emboldened; for instance, councillors on Armagh Urban District Council called for the project to be abandoned (Figure 6). While Nationalist politicians had been sceptical from the outset – Gerry Fitt suggested that the New City should be called 'Disneyland' – Unionist opinion in rural county Armagh and the west of Northern Ireland was increasingly divided over the long-term implications. Correspondence in December 1964 over the First Report between the Secretary of Armagh County Council, Harold Reid, and John Oliver of the Ministry of Health and Local Government, provides an insight into the emerging grounds for contestation,

including over the feared depopulation of rural areas, the compulsory purchase of land and compensation, and suspicions over the power that ‘experts’ and ‘planners’ had over the lives of local people.³ The latter two issues came to dominate protests against ‘government authority’, particularly following the vesting by the Ministry of Development of a large swathe of land to accommodate the development. Then, in January 1965, the New City was named after the first Unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, James Craig, in spite of the reservations held by O’Neill and his closest supporters. The Craigavon brand was evidently badly damaged before a sod had even been turned.

Figure 6: *Armagh Guardian* newspaper headline on 20 August 1964 in the immediate aftermath of Copcutt’s resignation.

A series of other reforms proposed by the Northern Ireland Government in the mid-1960s only served to amplify the rising discontent surrounding the New City project. Firstly, the related issues of local government reform and the introduction of comprehensive town and country planning legislation were successfully opposed for almost a decade. Indeed, four Unionist MPs refused to support the Government over the passage of the New Towns Act (Northern Ireland) in 1965, while several Stormont ministers voiced their opposition to the creation of a Ministry of Development to centrally manage strategic planning initiatives. All these were initially proposed in the Matthew Plan, and supported by O’Neill, but they exposed the fragility of reform processes that threatened the transformation of established political practices at the local level. Secondly, within a month of the Craigavon naming in early 1965 the Lockwood Committee reported on the siting of a second university in Northern Ireland. Matthew wanted it built in the New City, while others proposed its founding within the grounds of the Primate’s Palace in Armagh.⁴ However, the failure to select Derry as the preferred location, in favour of the small Protestant-majority town of Coleraine, unsurprisingly provoked a storm of protest. Copcutt’s resignation, for Glendinning (2008, p.337-338), dramatically brought to the fore how controversies surrounding regional planning and decision-making could ‘do damage to O’Neill’s wider agenda of “reform, reconciliation, economic and social equality”’. Such tensions would bubble more forcibly to the surface as the decade progressed.

Conclusions

Craigavon remained a 'ghost town' in the late 1960s. The visionary plans of those who conceived the New City in County Armagh were unlikely to flourish in the context of escalating civil unrest and 'the Troubles', particularly following the early critiques which framed a narrative of failure that subsequently dogged the project. However, the New City project in its first decade shares two critical issues in common with other places in the twentieth century. Firstly, utopian projects that are large-scale and long-term in their implementation are inevitably subject, for good or ill, to the vagaries of time and uncontrollable 'events'. For instance, the violence that quickly hastened the collapse of the first period of devolved government in Northern Ireland also precipitated local government reform and the winding up of Craigavon Development Commission in 1973. None of these eventualities could have been foreseen in the relative optimism of the early 1960s, but the dynamics driving forward the New City project were irretrievably lost in the maelstrom. Secondly, the necessity to plan *with* the people rather than *for* was also starkly exposed by the reactions against the project and the vesting of farmland. As Morrison (2006, p.147) argues, the Matthew Plan was 'cavalier in the way it dealt with people', and the technocratic approach that characterised many planning initiatives in the UK and elsewhere were increasingly challenged by the communities most impacted. It is no surprise that the ground-breaking Skeffington Report, *People and Planning: Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning*, was published in 1969 and explored such emotive concerns.

Craigavon may be synonymous for some with roundabouts, and, as Johnston (2015, p.24) notes, 'is often the butt of jokes', but the ultimate failure to implement many of the original design intentions need not define it indefinitely in the public mind. As this article has sought to convey, the New City is enmeshed within a wider story of the historical development of utopian thinking on town and country planning from the nineteenth century to the present, and it represents an interesting example of how these ideas were interpreted differently in diverse geographic, political and cultural contexts. The New City was at the epicentre of regional planning in Northern Ireland in the 1960s, intimately associated with the work of several eminent and enigmatic twentieth century architect-planners who continue to fascinate historians. Its most innovative design ideas also remain highly relevant today, and it is instructive to consider that many cities around the world, including Belfast, are attempting to create the sort of segregated cycling and walking greenways that Craigavon had since its inception. It is also continuing to physically evolve, with new homes, businesses and leisure facilities, very different in form to those proposed in the 1960s, emerging over recent decades, largely constructed by the private

sector in a further deviation from the original state-led development model. The centenary of Craigavon in another 50 years will again give cause to reflect on the experiences of the intervening period.

Andrew McClelland is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow at Maynooth University, County Kildare. He was born in Craigavon Area Hospital. This article is partly based on a lecture given in May 2016 as part of Armagh City Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council's exhibition on the 50th anniversary of Craigavon Development Commission.

References

Camblin, G. (1951) *The Town in Ulster*, Belfast: Mullan

Glendinning, M. (2008) *Modern architect: the life and times of Robert Matthew*, London: RIBA

Hall, P. (2002) *Urban and Regional Planning*, 4th Edition, London and New York: Routledge

Johnston, W. (2015) 'Craigavon's Roads', in R. McCabe (ed) *Creating Craigavon*, pp.22-24, Belfast: PLACE on behalf of Craigavon Borough Council

Matthew, R.H. (1964) *Belfast Regional Survey and Plan 1962*, Belfast: HMSO

Morrison, B. (2006) 'Planning the City; Planning the Region', in F.W. Boal and S.A. Royle (eds) *Enduring City: Belfast in the Twentieth Century*, pp.141-154, Belfast: Blackstaff Press

Mulholland, M. (2013) *Terence O'Neill*, Dublin: UCD Press on behalf of the Historical Association of Ireland

New City Design Group (1964) *First Report on the Proposed New City, Co. Armagh*, Belfast: HMSO

O'Neill, T. (1972) *The Autobiography of Terence O'Neill*, London: Hart-Davis

¹ The former Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Lord Brookeborough, was openly hostile to the idea of planning, which he considered a ‘socialist menace’ (O’Neill, 1972, p.47).

² Copcutt also attacked bureaucratic interference in the work of the design team and the growing influence of sectarian politics on the New City project.

³ See Public Record Office of Northern Ireland file no. LA/2/3/AG/72.

⁴ Armagh Urban District Council and Armagh County Council submitted a joint bid for the second university.