INTRODUCTION

New towns are being built as a matter of public policy around the world. In “advanced” industrial countries, in socialist Eastern Europe, and in the Third World, new towns have been selected as a relevant tool for coping with problems of urban growth. In the United States, urban policy makers have flirted with the new towns concept on several occasions, most notably with the Greenbelt towns of the 1930s and the Title VII new towns of the early 1970s. However, new towns have generally been dismissed as inappropriate and impractical for the American situation.¹

A revitalized new towns program in the United States will only arise if fresh evidence is available to demonstrate the benefits of them. The crippled Title VII new towns can be usefully studied, but more valuable lessons may be drawn from countries where new towns programs are receiving strong government support. A considerable amount of information has been generated about the British new towns program.² The consensus among U.S. planners and policy makers is that the British new towns are rather successful but have limited applicability to the American situation.

American observers who have dismissed the British experience as irrelevant to U.S. planning problems would do well to consider the French new towns program. The French have only recently turned to new towns: the first government document in support of them appeared in 1965, while large-scale construction dates from around 1970. The French program, however, more than makes up for its tardiness by the scale of the effort. The French new towns program is


now one of the largest in the world in terms of housing starts and new employment. By the late 1970s, the French new towns were creating around 20,000 housing starts and 15,000 new jobs per year.\(^3\)

Nine so-called ‘‘villes nouvelles’’ are being built in France at the moment (fig. I–1).\(^4\) Five of the new towns are located in the Paris region: Cergy-Pontoise, located 25 kilometers northwest of central Paris; Evry, 25 kilometers south; Marne-la-Vallée, 10 kilometers to the east; Melun-Sénart, 35 kilometers southeast; and Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 30 kilometers southwest. Four new towns are under construction elsewhere in France. L’Étang de Berre, 15 kilometers northwest of Marseille; Lille-Est, 5 kilometers east of Lille; L’Isle d’Abeau, 35 kilometers east of Lyon; and Le Vaudreuil, 25 kilometers southeast of Rouen. The French new towns are planned on a large scale. When completed near the end of the century, the nine new towns are expected to contain nearly three million residents. The planned sizes range from 140,000 for Le Vaudreuil to 500,000 for Evry and Berre. The others are expected to be around 250,000–300,000 each.\(^5\)

Despite the size and expense of the French new towns, no evaluations have yet been undertaken. Data is relatively scarce, while the literature has been confined to descriptions of the physical plans or the administrative structure. Virtually nothing of significance has appeared in English. The purpose of this book is to inform planners and policy makers around the world about the French new towns. This book will analyze what the French new towns are trying to accomplish; the administrative, financial, and political reforms needed to secure implementation of the program; and the achievements of the new towns. At all times, the evaluation of the French new towns will be undertaken with an eye to international applicability.

Why build new towns? In view of the low priority given to the development of a new towns construction program in the United States, the first chapter of this study will examine the reasons for the adoption of a new towns policy in France. New towns are used to

\(^3\) By comparison, the British new towns added 47,793 new jobs and 21,788 dwellings in 1974. Annual statistics are published in Town and Country Planning, usually the February issue.

\(^4\) Several other projects in France could qualify as new towns in the broad sense of the term, including Mourenx, Toulouse-le-Mirail, and Herouville-Saint-Cair. However, these projects are not included in the structure of administration and financing that has been established by the government for the nine new towns referred to here. These are the nine ‘‘villes nouvelles.’’ For a description of the other projects, see Pierre Merlin, Les Villes nouvelles (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969).

\(^5\) The French have not established precise figures concerning the desired populations at the completion of the projects. These figures represent the approximate targets for the year 2000.
Figure I-1. The French new towns
implement national policies for managing urban and regional growth. They play two roles: they are tools of intraregional planning, by organizing the growth of metropolitan areas, and they are tools of interregional planning, by stimulating the development of relatively poor regions.

The contemporary international planning movement for the construction of new towns originated with an Englishman, Ebenezer Howard, who wrote *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*. 6 Howard called for the construction of new towns, or garden cities, on the periphery of existing urban areas. The garden city was an isolated, self-contained community planned to be a predetermined size. It represented a "marriage" between town and country, where residents enjoy both the employment and shopping opportunities of the city and the healthy environment of the countryside. Surrounding the town would be a green belt of permanent open space to prevent sprawl and to preserve the physical independence of the garden city. The population would be recruited from overcrowded existing cities, to enable their redevelopment at lower densities. Once the planned size of 32,000 was reached, the garden city would no longer grow; further regional growth would be concentrated in additional new towns. Eventually, a system of new towns would be developed, each physically separated by a green belt but linked by a transportation system.

Howard’s book, written in 1898, literally as well as symbolically marked the culmination of nineteenth-century concern for the implications of rapid urbanization. Nineteenth-century cities were characterized by poor physical and social conditions. Residents in the rapidly growing cities suffered from diseases and a high mortality rate. Health problems were aggravated by poverty. Wages were low and unemployment high. Housing was overcrowded and without running water or adequate ventilation. Crime and other social disorders increased. The factories produced smoke and other pollutants.

Mumford has said, “Perhaps the greatest contribution made by the industrial town was the reaction it produced against its own greatest misdemeanors.” 7 Three types of reactions to the poor physical conditions in the nineteenth-century cities can be detected: (1) to “tinker” with existing cities by installing water and sewer systems,  

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slum clearance, highway construction, etc.; (2) to build suburbs that permit workers to escape from urban conditions every evening; and (3) to construct entirely new towns without the poor conditions of existing cities. The first two movements attracted the attention of most urban reformers, but it is the third one that concerns this book.

In recent years, new towns have played an additional role in the development of national urban growth policies. Planners concerned with the disparities between the richer and poorer parts of the country have sought ways to reduce the gap. The poorer regions suffer from relatively depressed economies characterized by high unemployment and declining industries. To improve the economic conditions in the depressed regions, new jobs must be located there. However, different jobs have different impacts on the region’s economic development. Jobs in certain industries will stimulate more economic growth than others. Some economists call these industries “basic” industries, because they sell most of their products outside the region and consequently bring in money. These industries contrast with “nonbasic” or “service” industries, which serve only the local population and merely recirculate money within the locality. Other economists call the key firms “propulsive” industries. The addition of a propulsive industry to a region will stimulate demand for other firms that sell products to the propulsive industry. Growth-inducing industries increase the demand for a variety of supporting services and facilities, such as housing, schools, shops, and recreation for the new workers.

New towns have been constructed in connection with these growth-inducing industries. Such towns provide the most up-to-date services and facilities for the convenience of the new industries. New towns can also be used directly to stimulate regional development. If propulsive industries can not easily be attracted, employment opportunities can be provided in the region by the construction of a new town. New towns can be the focus of investment in a depressed region where the existing urban areas are considered unattractive. Given this theoretical understanding of the intra- and interregional roles of new towns in the development of national urban growth policies, Chapter 1 will examine the reasons why new towns are now being built in France.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the administrative structure by which new towns are built in France. American critics invariably cite the need for administrative reform as a fundamental reason for the infeasibility of the new towns idea in the United States. Local authority boundaries are inappropriate for solving urban problems but are unlikely to be changed in the near future. New towns require a higher degree of coordination among different governments than is
currently exercised in the United States. Pessimism expressed by American writers concerning the practical ability to create new towns within the American administrative system is used as an excuse for evoking generally negative attitudes toward new towns. The critics may be correct about the likelihood of fundamental change in the American legal structure but they are wrong in their assessment of the extent of administrative reform actually needed. The belief that a unique form of administrative structure must be created in order to build new towns is based on knowledge of only the British new towns administration.

The British have a simple administrative structure for developing new towns. Each town is directed by a development corporation, appointed by the national government, that carries out virtually all aspects of urban development. It prepares the master plan, buys the land, installs roads and utilities, builds structures, rents the buildings and acts as landlord or sells them, provides maintenance, builds parks and playgrounds, provides the shopping centers and pubs, runs the buses, etc. Existing local authorities are consulted as a matter of courtesy but have little impact on policy decisions.

Critics who consider new towns impractical in the United States because the British administrative structure for creating them could never be adopted should examine the French experience. Like the United States, France has a large number of small local authorities with legal responsibility in the urban development process. In fact, France has fifty percent more local authorities per capita than the United States. The territory of the nine new towns encompasses 114 local governments. French planners have demonstrated that, given the will at the national level, an effective new towns policy can be developed with minimal changes in the traditional governmental structure.

The third chapter concentrates on major economic questions associated with new towns. The British method of financing new towns has been much admired but not replicated in other democratic societies. The British development corporation receives fifty-year Treasury loans to pay for construction costs. It must demonstrate that the project is likely to be financially sound. If the Treasury is satisfied with the financial prospects, it makes the loan at a rate of interest comparable to the rates available to other prime borrowers. The loans are repaid with the assets received by the development corporation primarily through sale or leasing of land or structures. This system gives the corporation a good deal of independence because it is freed from the need to secure capital grants on an annual basis.

Neither the French nor the American new towns have been able to secure the degree of financial independence enjoyed by the British.
The United States attempted to solve the problem by providing loan guarantees to private developers. A developer who wished to build a new town applied to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for a guarantee of up to $50 million to facilitate borrowing money from private financial sources at a lower rate of interest than would otherwise be available. In return the developer had to work for certain social and physical planning goals. The $50 million limit on guarantees to each new town proved inadequate when the U.S. economy slowed in the early 1970s. House sales lagged, reducing the rate of income generation. New towns developers, who were inexperienced with working at such a large scale, were unable to meet their financial targets. As a result HUD has had to provide more grants and guarantees than anticipated. In the long run, the new towns may still be profitable. At this time, however, they have required a larger government contribution than expected.

The French have steered a middle course between the monolithic national government framework in Great Britain and the dike-stopping approach of the American government. It is a complex system, heavily influenced by French administration irrationalities, and many problems remain. Although numerous difficulties have arisen, the system has been sufficiently workable to recommend it for analysis by the international planning community.

Chapter 4 discusses the role of the private sector in the French new towns development process. In Great Britain, the public sector performs virtually all the tasks associated with the building of the new towns, while the American new towns are almost entirely private ventures. Private developers are strongly involved in the French new towns effort, but the division of responsibilities between the public and private sectors is more rational in France than that achieved in the United States under the Title VII program. The French government in effect acts as the prime developer for the new towns, assuming most of the financial risks. The large new town sites are divided into smaller units, which are manageable by private developers. This arrangement avoids one of the major problems in the American new towns program. In the United States, new towns have been too large for private developers to manage successfully with their existing methods. The French have recognized the fact that private involvement is most efficient if the private developers are permitted to work at their more usual scale of operations. Consequently, the government has devised a number of tools to channel private developers into the new towns and away from undesirable locations.

Chapter 5 examines the major accomplishment of the French new towns: the achievement of socially balanced communities. In contrast
to most one-class dormitory suburbs, the new towns contain a relatively heterogeneous population, with a mixture of working-class and middle-class families. Furthermore, the new towns are planned to achieve a balance between residences and nonresidential functions, particularly employment opportunities. Many European cities, including Paris, are socially segregated in a spatial pattern different from U.S. cities—the poor live in the periphery rather than the center. Despite these differences the social problem is basically the same: geographic segregation prevents the poor from achieving access to the high quality of housing and supporting services enjoyed by the middle class. Because of their peripheral location the French new towns run the risk of being all low-income projects. Planners have therefore placed a high priority on the attraction of middle-income families to ensure a balanced mix of social classes. This policy has achieved considerable success. Middle-class families have been attracted through the provision of single-family, owner-occupied housing, good shops and recreation facilities, and especially through the provision of job opportunities, including offices.

In the United States new towns have been proposed as a mechanism for integrating low-income families into suburbs that are otherwise closed to them. The French experience demonstrates that socially heterogeneous new communities can be developed, even within the framework of a market system, if a sufficiently high priority is placed on the effort.

For the American observer, two broad patterns emerged in evaluating the achievements of the French new towns. First, the French managed to overcome considerable political and financial obstacles to implement the new towns program. In particular, the French planners had to face problems relating to the inclusion of local authorities and the private sector in the development process. Their solution is extremely relevant to American problems of urban development. Second, the benefits from building new towns are more in the field of social planning than physical planning. The French new towns, like similar programs elsewhere in the world, have not been able to capture the percentage of growth planned for the regions where they are located. However, this study concludes that new towns appear to provide a measurably superior way of life for its residents than is available in alternative forms of urban growth.