CONCLUSION

I have traced the history of the French new towns policy, the administrative and financial arrangements for implementing the policy, and the quantitative and social achievements. Although the policy is relatively recent in origin useful lessons can be drawn from the experience. For American observers, two lessons are particularly significant. The first lesson concerns the administrative and financial system. As in the United States, France has local authorities and private developers who cannot be ignored in the urban development process. The British-style development corporation is as inappropriate to French as it is to American administrative realities. The French new towns supporters were faced with the task of creating a workable system that preserved the roles of the local authorities and the private sector in the development of nationally financed new towns. Although the precise details of the French solution could not be replicated in the United States, the general principles are clearly relevant.

The French have created new institutions that disturb existing relationships as little as possible. The Etablissement Public d'Aménagement is a public agency with much less power than the British development corporation. It is concerned only with the aspects of new towns development for which local authorities and private developers are clearly unequipped. The French have also solved the local government crisis by coopting the existing local authorities into participating in the new towns development process. The local authorities come together in a union, the Syndicat Communautaire d'Aménagement, which controls the rural areas to be urbanized and leaves alone most of the existing population in the local authorities. The most important function that the SCA performs is the establishment of a uniform tax base within the urbanizing area.

The French have solved one of the major practical problems associated with new towns development in the United States—that new towns are not profitable activities for private developers. The United States has failed to achieve a satisfactory method of supporting the private construction of new towns. Title VII of the 1970 Housing
and Urban Development Act authorizes HUD to make loans and guarantees to private developers of new towns. This financial assistance would permit these developers to borrow money below market rates, thereby reducing their carrying charges and consequently the overall project costs. This method proved unsatisfactory when developers began to incur higher expenses than anticipated. Although critics have blamed both the developers and the government for the failures, the real problem is that a new town is much too big for a single private developer to organize.

The French have a more rational method for preserving the profitable participation of private developers in the new towns development process. The EPA acts as the prime developer for the new town. It chops up the new town into a collection of smaller projects that can reasonably be managed by private developers. In this way private developers can achieve profits in their normal manner, while the risks are taken by the only institution large enough to do so—the national government. New towns may or may not be more economical than other projects if all costs of development are compared. The critical point is that their successful realization in a liberal economy depends upon a rational distribution of responsibilities between the public and private sectors based on the strengths and weaknesses of each.

The second lesson for the United States concerns the benefits achieved by the French new towns. They have not succeeded in drastically reorienting the direction of growth in the Paris region. Between 1971 and 1975 the five Paris new towns attracted around 100,000 housing starts, 90,000 residents, and 50,000 jobs. While these are impressive figures, they constitute only some 15–20 percent of the continued growth of the Paris region. The legal and political support is lacking to concentrate a significantly higher percentage of growth in the new towns. In 1965 the Paris new towns were planned to accommodate over three-fourths of the growth of the Paris region until 2000. That figure has steadily declined since the original master plan. In 1971 the sixth plan called for about one-fourth of the growth of the Paris region to be concentrated in the new towns. The seventh plan in 1976 programmed the more realistic figure of 15 percent for the new towns between 1976 and 1980. In effect, the percentage of growth planned for the new towns has declined until it has reached a point comparable to the experience of the London region.

In view of the failure of the new towns in Paris (as in London) to attract more than 15–20 percent of the region's growth, the main benefit of the new towns must be found elsewhere. In fact, the new
towns offer a living environment superior to alternative projects. To some extent this is a qualitative judgment but considerable data can be generated to justify it. The major achievement of the French new towns is the creation of socially balanced communities. There is a much greater mixture of different housing types and a balance between residential and nonresidential functions. The new towns, in contrast to other suburban areas, are becoming strong commercial and employment centers. They have much more job opportunities, stores, and recreational facilities than elsewhere in the suburbs. As heterogeneous, self-contained communities the new towns have already made a distinctive contribution to France.

American planners must therefore realize that new towns are not mechanisms for ending all suburban sprawl. They will never succeed in terms of quantitative impact. Rather, new towns are balanced, self-contained communities. A rational new towns policy in the United States can only be based on an understanding that the projects are primarily oriented to achieving social, not quantitative goals.

This evaluation of the French new towns should serve as a beginning rather than a summing up of the understanding of the contributions of new towns to the development of national urban growth policies. The conclusion that the most significant contribution of the French new towns is the creation of socially balanced communities must be further explored. Although we know that the new towns contain a greater mixture of different types of people and functions we don’t know the significance of that fact. Information from Britain indicates that their new towns contain a lower incidence of crime, mortality, and health problems than in unplanned cities of similar size. The French new towns are still much too new to permit the compilation of meaningful data. However, the lower level of social disorders could be due to the peculiar characteristics of families attracted (young and mobile) rather than to the socially balanced environment of the new towns. In the United States, new towns could be used to bring together residents of different races as well as different incomes.

This study has raised many questions in addition to answering some. The construction of entirely new towns will always remain one of the most stimulating dreams for urban planners. The French have made the dream a concrete and practical reality.