

Poundbury, Dorset, 2008.



Many of the hallmarks of what we consider successful urbanism in the great cities of the world (or the analogue in much of America, college campuses) evolve from incremental accretions and developments over time – even happenstance.

Creating a successful urban space with an identifiable sense of place in a single building campaign is a far different matter; while we can identify a handful of successes, there are many more failures. For every Rockefeller Center, there is an Empire State Plaza (not without architectural interest, but an overscaled desert

To accomplish this, we seek to survey some of the successes and failures of attempts to create ground-up new communities – complexes, campuses, villages, towns – over the past 150 years.

The British experience: three generations of new towns

We begin our journey in England, where Ebenezer Howard's concept of the Garden City gave rise to the leafy twentieth-century suburb. Howard's more radical conception of the Garden City as an autonomous economic center, however, was never realized in

as standalone economic centers, even if their earnest embrace of orthodox European social modernism – whittled in execution by budget-strapped municipal councils – often result in deeply unsatisfying urban spaces.

Most recently, an offshoot of New Urbanism championed by Prince Charles has resulted in a series of planned traditional developments, including a standalone village, Poundbury, Dorset. Derided by critics as a stage set – an unfair criticism given the caliber of talent involved and attention to the craft of building – could the key to successful urban placemaking,



Aalto, plan for Seinäjoki, 1958.

LOCUS EX NIHILO

placemaking in a tabula rasa condition

Construction begins at the New Town of Harlow, 1951.



urbanistically), or, conversely, a MetroTech Commons (a reasonably successful public space, but lacking in any placemaking architectural identity).

This proposal seeks to identify ingredients of successful placemaking in a *tabula rasa* condition – that is, a holistically-planned urban ensemble of new construction that lacks meaningful existing context. This is a question of direct relevance to RAMSA's contemporary practice, as we increasingly are entrusted with the design of entire urban precincts – whether in Ohio or Chongqing – executed on aggressive schedules.

practice; most of the 'Garden Cities' remain bedroom communities tied by rail to jobs in traditional cities.

Less well-known are the postwar English New Towns, chartered by the New Towns Act of 1946. Unlike the Garden Cities, the New Towns achieved some success

Hans Scharoun, Siemensstadt, 1930.



after a century of looking forward, be hiding in the past?

Continental alternatives

While it is the British experience – the focus of some prior investigation – that launched this inquiry, we propose to expand the scope of investigation to three strains of new towns in continental Europe, predicated on philosophies less prevalent in America: modern humanism in Finland; the company town in Germany; and a politically-charged return to classical ideals in Italy. A preliminary itinerary anchored by notable projects follows.



Latina (Littoria), Italy, 1932.

PRELIMINARY ITINERARY

➤ JFK ▶ LHR \$450 one-way

ENGLAND: Days 1–5

🏠 4 nights @ \$200/night
🚗 Car hire, 4 days @ \$50/day

The third magnet: the English Garden City (1900s – 1930s)

Letchworth Garden City

The template for the 20th-century suburb, although it was conceived with grander ambitions. We begin here as a baseline.

The promise of Modernism: the postwar New Towns (1940s – 1970s)

Stevenage

One of the more completely realized New Towns, with a novel attempt to inculcate pedestrian streetlife by limiting vehicle traffic to below-grade service roadways.

Milton Keynes, Crawley, Basildon, and Hemel Hempstead

One critic has written of the New Towns: 'More or less successful in terms of health, education, and general prosperity, each lacks the kind of emotional core or architectural heart that makes us think so highly of old towns and cities.' What are the absent elements needed to create an enduring sense of place?

Little England: the traditional new town (1990s – 2000s)

Poundbury, Dorset

HRH Prince Charles' experimental new town, masterplanned by Leon Krier in 1987, with works by Quinlan Terry, John Simpson, and others.

Fairford Leys, Buckinghamshire; and Dickens Heath, West Midlands
Poundbury has inspired two subsequent attempts at new communities governed by design codes, both by John Simpson.

➤ LHR ▶ HEL \$175 one-way

FINLAND: Days 6–9

🏠 4 nights @ \$200/night
🚗 Car hire, 3 days @ \$50/day

Northern lights: Nordic Humanism Seinäjoki City Center

Aalto's take on the new town, realized over nearly forty years (1951–1987). Unlike the stripped-classical models of the Italian new towns, or the wistful romanticism of the recent English New Urbanism, Aalto's approach reflects a commitment to modern form in the service of humanism.

Säynätsalo Town Hall

Seinäjoki's intellectual predecessor, the complex of buildings Aalto designed for the government center at Säynätsalo reflects a distillation of millenia of European urbanistic principles (the *cardus* and *decumanus*, amphitheatres, the unconscious humanism of the medieval vernacular) into one building campaign.

➤ HEL ▶ TXL \$125 one-way

GERMANY: Days 10–12

🏠 2 nights @ \$200/night
🚗 Public transit @ \$10/day

Does worker housing still work? Siemensstadt

A Weimar-era new community built for employees of the titular Siemens company, with buildings by Hugo Haring, Hans Scharoun, Walter Gropius, and others.

➤ TXL ▶ FCO \$130 one-way

ITALY: Days 13–15

🏠 3 nights @ \$200/night
🚗 Rail transit @ \$40/day

Authority and austere classicism: the Italian new towns of the 1930s

Saubadia (1934)

The second of Mussolini's new towns, built on fill in the drained Pontine Marshes – the formerly mosquito-ridden swamps southwest of Rome whose "bad air" gave name to the disease *malaria* – is a dramatic 1930s reinterpretation of Roman town planning principles.

Latina (1932, formerly Littoria); Pontinia (1935); Aprilia (1937); Pomezia (1939)

Each of the five new towns uses a distinct urban palette in order to create a defining sense of place for each.

➤ FCO ▶ JFK \$450 one-way