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Tagungsbericht: How Long are New Towns New? European Post-War New Towns as Authentic Places in a Comparative Perspective

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Tagungsbericht: *How Long are New Towns New? European Post-War New Towns as Authentic Places in a Comparative Perspective.*

Workshop at the Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam,
23rd – 24th February 2017

European post-war new towns are getting older. The Slovenian new town Nova Gorica will celebrate its 70th anniversary in September 2017, whilst Milton Keynes, the UK's last 'new city', is celebrating its 50th birthday with a range of events held throughout 2017. These events include the International New Town Day, with the theme "New Towns as Cities of Comings and Goings: Presents & Futures" in co-organisation with the International New Town Institute, which is based in the new town Almere in the Netherlands.¹ In recent years new towns built after the Second World War have gained in popularity amongst scholars working in the fields of social and cultural history. In the case of new towns in East Central Europe, scholars tend to concentrate on the early Stalinist years; on the planning and construction of new towns and on the practices and experiences of the first residents who settled in the towns. The urban, economic, social and cultural developments as well as the generational shifts of the later decades have so far received much less attention. Some scholars in the field of heritage studies have paid attention to the perspectives of new towns and their potential for cultural tourism.

The workshop, organised by ANA KLADNIK and ANDREAS LUDWIG (both Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam) and supported by the Leibniz Research Alliance "Historical Authenticity", aimed to debate the historical dimensions and of post-war new towns in Western and Eastern Europe, as well as to raise questions on whether new towns have been considered places of national and cultural heritage and how they have been represented in the public sphere (by museums, tourism and the media). The workshop's title "How Long are New Towns New?" referred to the possible "creation" of new towns as authentic places, the agents rediscovering new towns as authentic places and the forms of such rediscovery.

The first panel focused on the historical recognition of new towns in post-war Europe. The first speaker, ROSEMARY WAKEMAN (New York), discussed

¹ <http://www.newtowninstitute.org/>

the understanding of new towns as ideal cities and the origins of the New Town Movement. She emphasized the importance of lived experiences in the new towns and the way the creation of new towns enabled new forms of administration. She discussed the importance of civic heritage and the necessity of looking for the authenticity of new towns within different inter-relations (such as in the family and between citizens) in the new town, rather than in their architecture and plans. LOIC VADELORGE (Paris) concentrated on the building and conservation of French new towns from the 1970s onwards. He pointed out that whilst administratively most of the French “new” towns are not new anymore, they are still considered to be so. From the 1970s onwards an effort has been made to produce a history of post-war new towns and to discuss their heritage. Two museums were founded to address this. According to Vadelorge, the authenticity of new towns was created by the town planners who wanted to make the towns simultaneously contemporary and traditional. The third panellist, ESZTER GANTNER (Marburg) introduced the case of heritagisation, the process of the revalorisation of new towns in East Central Europe after 1989. Through the example of the Hungarian new town of Dunaújváros she illustrated an example of the shift to the new town being considered ‘heritage’. There was an initial attempt in 1996 for Dunaújváros to be considered as national heritage, but it was only in 2004 that the town’s chief architect succeeded in getting the town listed on the national heritage list. The panel was followed by a lively discussion mostly including on whether the discourses on new towns and their construction (assisted by the residents and volunteers) was authentic, and on the comparison of residents’ experiences, including the experiences of different generations, e.g. first settlers vs. younger generations.

The second panel “Mass Housing as *Erinnerungsorte*” began with a presentation by MILES GLENDINNING (Edinburgh) who outlined European mass housing in its global context. He emphasised the difficulties in systematically preserving mass-housing. An example of this can be seen in current attempts by the Russian government to demolish the so called ‘Khrushchevka’ flats, which consider them as having no heritage. Whilst there are some exceptions, like the case of pre-war Red Vienna, it is otherwise impracticable to systematically preserve mass housing as historical monuments. However, organisations like DOCOMOMO aim to systematically record and document information, including contemporary and historic images of mass housing, as well as interview transcripts with individual agents. The second panellist FLORIAN URBAN (Glasgow) discussed the East German *Plattenbau* as a form of ambivalent heritage. He presented examples of how the “slab” flats have been criticized since the 1970s and how they have been remodelled to conserve historic cultural values, or repainted or demolished since the 1990s. URBAN argued that the “slab” is part of the modern and not the socialist heritage and that mass housing should not be

considered an *Erinnerungsort* or as places of historical authenticity but rather as, what he calls, a “mirror of visions”.

The third panel discussed new towns as places of cultural heritage. The first speaker, SHANE DOWNER (Milton Keynes) presented the cultural strategies of British new town Milton Keynes. He argued that Milton Keynes sees culture-led development as a priority for the city. He listed the city’s investments in cultural venues over the last ten years and its plans for the future. For example, the Council agreed on a motion for Milton Keynes to bid to apply for the UK’s 2023 European Capital of Culture nomination. According to DOWNER, Milton Keynes is no longer a “New Town” but a regional city, which, by 2023, aims to be an international one. JURE RAMŠAK (Koper) presented a somewhat untypical example for new towns, but a rather typical example for border towns: the case of Nova Gorica. The town was built on the Yugoslav side of the new border with Italy after 1947. From the mid-1980s onwards, casinos started to appear in the town and the number grew exponentially in the following decade. RAMŠAK showed postcards of the town from the 1970s, which mainly depicted buildings from the 1950s, mass-housing complexes, partisan monuments, and greenery around the town, whilst postcards from the 1980s and 1990s tended to show only the casinos. The third presentation, as an exception, did not concentrate on a post-war new town, but presented the case of the pre-war new modern “white city” of Tel Aviv, founded in 1909. MARINA EPSTEIN-PLIOUCHTCH (Haifa) argued that Tel Aviv is an authentic new town, which received UNESCO recognition as a world heritage site in 2003 and was the subject of a special issue of the *DOCOMOMO* journal in 2009, dedicated to Tel Aviv’s one hundred anniversary and a century of modern building. In her conclusion, she presented the striking contrast between the “old” “White City” and the “new” “Ayalon (Skyscraper) City”.

The fourth and last panel focussed on the public representation of European post-war new towns, with MICHAL WIŚNIEWSKI and HELENA POSTAWKA-LECH (both Krakow) presenting the example of Polish Nowa Huta. The town was established in 1949 in the immediate vicinity of a steel factory and close to Krakow (which was listed on the UNESCO heritage list in 1979). In the 1980s Nowa Huta formed the stronghold of the Solidarity movement - *Solidarność*. In 2004 Nowa Huta was registered as a national monument, although it was not yet protected. Since then it seems that a heritage industry started to develop expediently; new museums were opened, new festivals launched, guided tours for tourists organized, products and modern designs which illustrated the town’s past were developed (these were torn between workers and pioneers who helped to build the town, those who were active in the Solidarity movement and the younger generation, who have tried to build the town’s identity with the knowledge of the older generation). The discussion of the panel

turned to questions on who forms resp. who had formed these heritage narratives and on the correlation between authenticity and identity.

The concluding discussion addressed the characteristics of European post-war new towns as places of historical authenticity. The main consideration focused on whether the concept of historical authenticity is useful regarding post-war new towns. If the original plans of new towns are to be considered authentic, how long were the new towns being true to their original plan?

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