

London 1944

GREATER LONDON PLAN



Presentation of the County of London Plan, 1943.

On the very left behind the table (wearing glasses) is Patrick Abercrombie

In 1943 Patrick Abercrombie (1879-1957) presented the County of London Plan. He designed this plan in collaboration with J.H. Forshaw, who was working at the time as an architect for the London County Council, the administrative body responsible for commissioning the plan.¹ The following year Abercrombie presented the Greater London Plan, a plan for the

London region commissioned by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. The Greater London Plan, as well as the County of London Plan, attempted to offer solutions to London's rampant growth, incoherent architectonic development, increasing traffic congestion, inferior housing conditions, inadequate and poor distribution of public open space, and en-

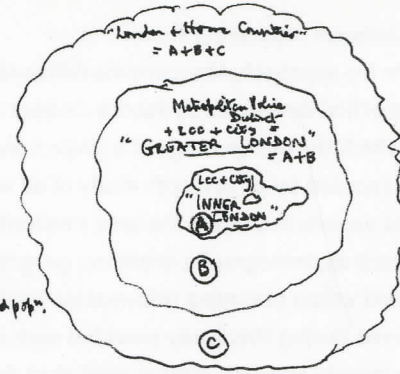
tangled housing and employment functions. Both plans have been called the most significant contributions to the practice of urban planning in Great Britain. Down through the years methods developed and applied by Abercrombie have been standardized, slowly but surely, and are still being used by architects and planners.

When Abercrombie was asked to design the Greater London Plan, he was one of the most prominent planners in Great Britain and a figure of authority within the Garden City Association. Abercrombie endorsed the urban planning ideas of Ebenezer Howard and argued passionately for regional planning. Inspired by his belief that a number of small communities function better than one large center, Abercrombie designed sixteen regional plans in Great Britain between 1922 and 1942.²

In drafting these regional plans, Abercrombie proceeded from two major points of departure. His first concern was the quality of the countryside and the maintenance or creation of open space and areas of verdure. His second priority was the importance of cities to the regional and national economy. Abercrombie tried to form an entity of city and countryside. To achieve this goal, he argued for coherent planning and a good coordination of open space, architecture, and building materials. Part of this concept called for concentrated clusters of buildings with a sufficient amount of

Sketch of the arrangement of Greater London,
from P. Abercrombie's Working Papers. A: inner city;
B: Greater London; C: adjacent counties

Notes on areas (Barlow)
 Ring "A" = LCC + City = Inner London.
 "A+B" = Greater London.
 "B alone" = Outer London.
 "A+B+C" = London & Home Counties.
 "London & Home Counties" means:- London, Essex, Herts, Kent, Middlesex, Surrey, Bucks & Beds. (8 Counties)
 Notes: Beds & Bucks are generally not included in this description by the Population Council, but were so by the Barlow Report, which took into account the Home Ministry of Labour's statistics for insured pop.



London, north bank of the Thames, view from the south, 1947

distance separating them.

In his approach, Abercrombie followed the method developed by Patrick Geddes in which the design stage of a project was preceded by an in-depth study of all sorts of aspects related to the area involved, such as demography, economy, geography, and urban planning. Information gathered during this study provided such a concrete basis for further work that development of the design seemed to proceed automatically. According to Abercrombie, this method greatly benefited the efficiency of the design practice.

In 1938 the government appointed a committee, headed by Sir Montague Barlow, to make a nationwide study of the distribution and efficiency of industry, and of the results of urban and economic overconcentration. Abercrombie was a member of this committee.³

Findings and recommendations published by the committee in 1940 basically reflected the body of ideas embodied in the garden city movement. The watchword was the decentralization of industry and the relocation of more than a million people throughout the entire country. To get to the heart of the matter with speed and efficiency, the committee recommended a national plan. National and local organizations, all with specific powers, were to design and develop urban plans. Lastly, the creation of financial and juridical frameworks would be needed within which such plans could be implemented.

In drafting the Greater London Plan, Abercrombie developed five main themes contained in the Barlow Report: a reduction in the population of the London region, a good distribution of industries and their employees, the restriction of new industries in the county of London and adjacent counties, the maintenance of London's position as a major seaport, and the establishment of planning organizations for the London region. Abercrombie's physical planning concept for the Greater London Plan featured four concentric zones: one for the county of London and three for the region. The innermost zone was characterized by its high density: 185 to 250 inhabitants per

hectare. The second ring was to be composed primarily of residential districts, with an average population density of 125 per hectare. This suburban ring was surrounded by the green belt, a zone that formed a buffer between the urban expansion of London, on the one hand, and regional communities, along with the farming area, on the other. Furthermore, the green belt – as an agricultural zone and as a continuation and completion of the urban park system – fulfilled the agrarian and recreational needs of the London region.

The outermost ring was the zone in which Abercrombie intended to realize the decentralization of people and industry. He wanted to create a new housing and employment environment for 383,000 Londoners in towns not yet on the map. Abercrombie preferred to build these towns in undeveloped areas. In cases where this proved impossible, original settlements could be adapted to function as town centers. New towns were to be modest in size, both physically and administratively. In addition, each was to have its own character and functions (commercial, industrial, cultural, residential, administrative and educative), adequately varied employment opportunities, and a balanced composition of the population. An important element of the Greater London Plan was the introduction of autonomous and differentiated entities known as neighborhood units: organic communities that formed the basic components needed to work out urban plans in precise detail. Compulsory ingredients were one or more schools, clubhouses, shops, and greenery. Differentiation in housing typology was to guarantee that a variety of groups could live in the town. In the Greater London Plan, Abercrombie designed neighborhood units on regional, urban, and district levels; each of these differentiated entities had its own characteristics and was clearly separated, physically speaking, from the rest.

Abercrombie provided access to London by means of five county beltways. Ten main radial roads, which began at the second ring and which largely followed the route of roads previously built, connected the

new towns with London. Additional links between the two were provided by (existing) railroad lines.

Thanks in part to presentations that appealed to the imagination – drawings from a bird's-eye perspective, rather than statistics and diagrams – the designers were able to provide the public at large with an insight into the Greater London Plan. The oldest and most important local light industry, along with agriculture and horticulture, was located in Lee Valley, an area of rolling hills northwest of London. The drawback of this economic potential, however, was the resulting unstructured ribbon development, which threatened to overrun the area and eradicate the rural features of the landscape. To call a halt to this situation, Abercrombie's plan transformed Lee Valley into an important green link between the center of London (East End) and the open countryside. Minor industrial expansion was permitted, as long as it did not affect the agrarian and scenic quality of the area. The new town of Harlow was to become the administrative and commercial center of Lee Valley.

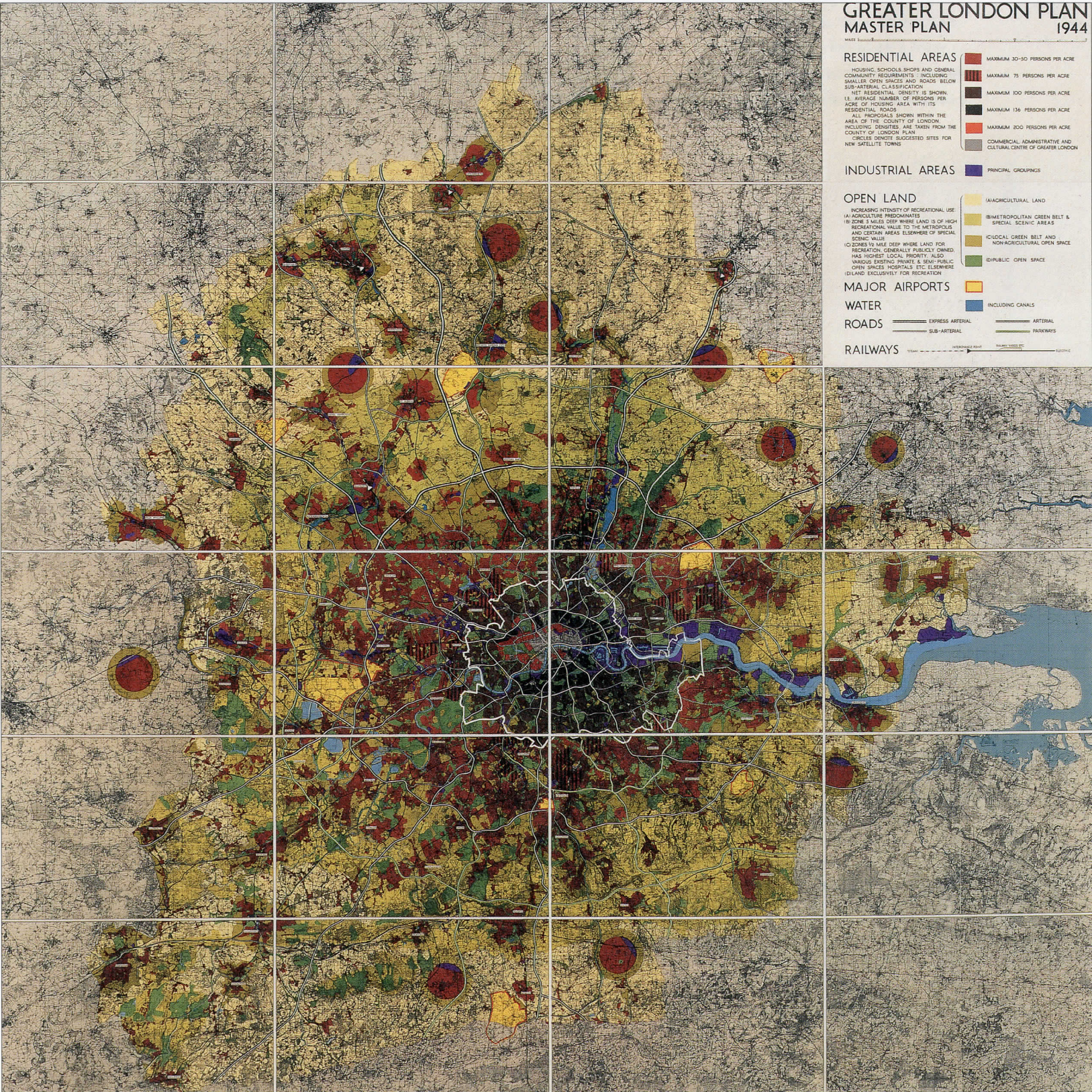
A royal committee, under the leadership of Lord Charles Reith, studied the feasibility of implementing the Greater London Plan. In 1946 this committee reported that the green belt had to be at least 1,200 meters wide to fulfill the proposed functions. In determining the locations of new towns, planners were to keep in mind the national planning system, as well as regional priorities. To ensure autonomous economic, social, and cultural development, the committee calculated that new towns and industries needed to be a minimum of 40 kilometers away from the center of London. The population of each town could vary from twenty to sixty thousand: it was thought that these figures were large enough to provide sufficient variation in jobs, facilities, social classes, and services.

In concurrence with public preference, 90 to 95 percent of the housing supply would consist of low-rise buildings. The remaining 5 to 10 percent was reserved for high-rise construction. The committee's advice was to determine, prior to drafting a plan,

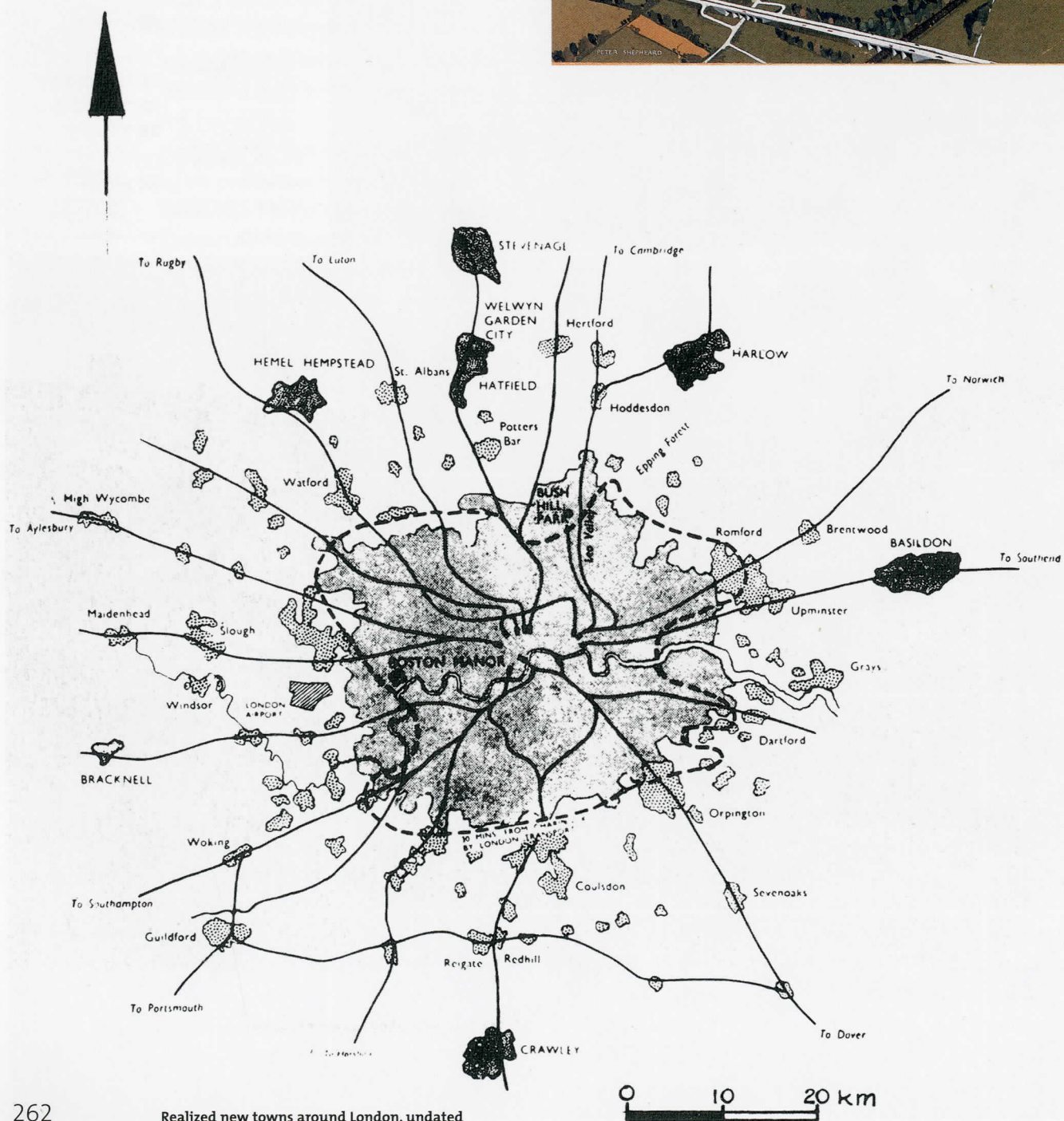
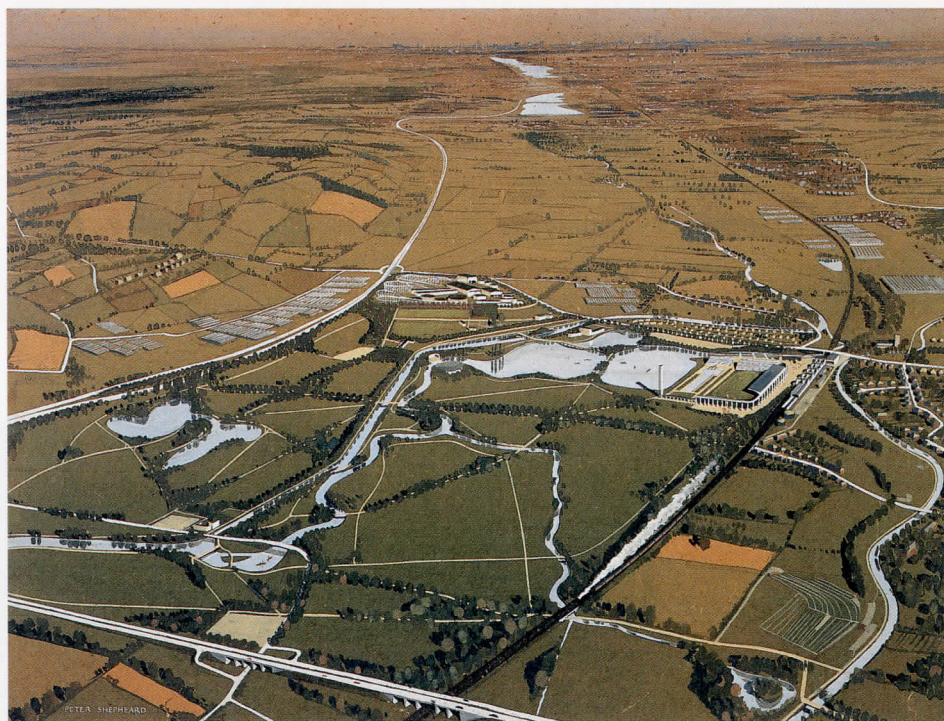
The Greater London Plan, area within the County of London, 1944.

The legend contains, from top to bottom, seven categories: residential areas (housing, schools, shops and general public facilities, including small open areas and secondary roads), the maximum netto population density is noted behind the bracket; industrial zones; open areas with an increasing intensity of recreational use (A: dominantly agriculture; B: five mile zone of

high recreational value on the metropolitan level; C: half mile zone accommodating recreation on municipal land with local significance; D: exclusively for recreation); major airports; water; roads (from left to right: main highway, main road, secondary road, parkway); railroads (from left to right: steam, transfer point, switchyard, electricity). The circles indicate the location of new satellite towns



Bird's eye view of Lee Valley,
aquarel by P. Shephard, 1944



the maximum size of the town in question, and to decide whether the planned form was to be definite or whether organic expansion should be considered a possibility. And finally, they recommended the creation of an infrastructure before the onset of building activities.

The results of the Reith Committee's study were directly responsible for the New Towns Act of August 1, 1946. This act gave administrators and designers the legislative framework they needed to tackle, in a well-considered manner, the dire housing shortage and the establishment of new industries. Regulations included in

this act covered the long-term financing of housing and industrial construction; investments in roads, building sites, cables, lines, conduits, and so forth; measures pertaining to the acquisition of land; and, for new towns, the establishment of local development corporations.⁴

The Greater London Plan and the New Towns Act paved the way for the founding of twenty new towns in Great Britain. In only a handful of cases were existing towns made larger. Most of these new towns rose at undeveloped locations. Nationally known architects designed the master plans, and local architects took

care of further development and specifications.⁵

Eight new towns were sited around London. Those north of the Thames were Hemel Hempstead (1947), Stevenage (1946), Welwyn Garden City (1948), Hatfield (1948), Harlow (1947), and Basildon (1949); the two south of the river were Crawley (1947) and Bracknell (1949). Between 1946 and 1950, fourteen new towns were built, in stages, and six industrial development areas were designated. The infrastructure was based on a hierarchical system. At a regional level, a network of motorways (beltways and radial



Single family dwelling in Stevenage, 1962



Stevenage apartment building, 1952

arteries) linked the new towns with London. Local roads formed connections between the towns themselves. Traffic within the towns was served by district and neighborhood streets.

In many ways, the realization of new towns in the vicinity of London can be called a success. Interest in these towns was so great that the size originally proposed for most of them was increased after several years had passed. During a twenty-year period, around 332,000 Londoners relocated to one of the new towns surrounding London, a figure that approached the prognosis fairly closely. The number of inhabitants and industrial

establishments in the new towns stabilized, on average, about ten years after the town was founded. Less successful was the attempt to achieve a varied demographic composition. Those settling in the new towns were, for the most part, young families. This resulted in a population that is, at the moment, composed chiefly of elderly people.

Abercrombie incorporated his urban planning ideas and experiences into the Greater London Plan and the County of London Plan. His strong point was his ability to take an extremely complex project and reduce it to a single well-organized concept, and to present that concept al-

most as though it were a blueprint. The outcome was both social organism and work of art. The Greater London Plan was praised as 'the town planning classic for which the time [was] ripe, and the world has been waiting.' Lewis Mumford even described the plan as the mature organism born of the garden city embryo formulated by Ebenezer Howard in his book *To-Morrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898).

Pauline van Roosmalen

Notes

1. Before the outbreak of World War II, the MARS Plan (1937) had been designed for London; in addition, various studies had been carried out and plans developed by Raymond Unwin (1938), Arthur Ling (1938), and Sir Edwin Luytens (1942).
2. Abercrombie designed his first regional plan for Doncaster in 1922.
3. In 1937, 25 percent of Great Britain's population lived in London and the Home Counties, and 5 to 6 percent of the population of England and Wales worked in the agricultural sector. F.J. Osborn. in *E. Howard. Garden cities of To-Morrow*. 27, 39.
4. Such an organization was to be dissolved upon the realization of a town.
5. Originally, new towns were planned according to a zoning system, and main roads were to be realized, wherever possible, outside the town center. In later plans, the accent shifted more toward a separation of various types of traffic.

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Stevenage shopping center, 1962