‘Uneasy bedfellows’ conceiving urban megastructures: precarious public–private partnerships in post-war British New Towns

Journal Article**Author(s):**

Gosseye, Janina

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‘Uneasy Bedfellows’ Conceiving Urban Megastructures

Precarious public-private partnerships in post-war British New Towns

Introduction

From its inception, the European welfare state was a contract between three partners: the state, civic society and, the private sector. In Europe’s various welfare state regimes,¹ ‘experts of the built environment,’ such as politicians, architects, planners, economists and sociologists, played a central role in the definition of spatial policies that would contribute to the cultivation of social citizenship. To this end, these experts often collaborated with major business interests, including construction companies, materials manufacturers and property developers.² And yet, studies documenting the architecture and urbanism of the European welfare state frequently overlook the role of the private sector, as emphasis is commonly placed on governmental initiatives.³ However, apart from governments, and often in close collaboration with governments, the private sector made important contributions to (amongst other things) the development of new collective architectures that shaped the post-war civic realm and that sought to forge a new post-war society.⁴

New Towns in particular were sites of experiment. Conceived as tools for ‘reconstruction and resource extraction, for population resettlement and territorial dominion,’ post-war New Towns, historian Rosemary Wakeman posits, all ‘shared a utopian rhetoric and conception,’ and all sought to be at the forefront of urban and architectural development – to present ‘a

¹ Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*.

² Swenarton, Avermaete and van den Heuvel, ‘Introduction,’ 14.

³ For instance: Bullock, *Building the Post-War World*; Cupers, *The Social Project*; Grafe, *People's Palaces*; Monnier and Klein, *Les Années Zup*; Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture*; Stevenson, *Palaces for the People*; Van Herck and Avermaete, *Wonen in Welvaart*.

⁴ Mattsson, ‘Where the Motorways Meet: Architecture and Corporatism in Sweden 1968.’

marvellous glimpse of tomorrow.’⁵ After the British Parliament passed the ‘New Towns Act’ in 1946, more than thirty New Towns were built across England, Scotland and Wales.⁶ In line with their utopian pedigree, these British New Towns pursued ‘fundamentally new approaches to urban design.’⁷ Their innovative attitudes were facilitated by the formation of New Town Development Corporations. These were independent, administrator-led governmental bodies that were responsible for the building and management of new British New Towns. Their ‘non-municipal’ status freed New Town Development Corporations from local political pressures as well as from the municipal ethos of all-encompassing council provision, which enabled them to more easily embark on collaborations with the private sector. As a result, various public-private partnerships between New Town Development Corporations and private developers were set up in post-war British New Towns that gave rise to new collective spaces, which were hybrid in character and which challenged and redefined precisely what constituted the post-war civic realm.

This paper focuses on one of the most prominent new types of collective space that resulted from such public-private partnerships: the megastructural ‘heart’ or ‘central area’ of second-wave, or ‘Mark II’ British New Towns.⁸ Combining mass consumption with culture, education and administrative functions, these New Town megastructures blended the concepts of ‘shopping centre’ and ‘civic centre,’ and thus embodied the welfare state’s belief that capitalism could neither live with nor without the existence of a pervasive welfare system (and vice versa). Through the analysis of three New Town megastructures – Cumbernauld Centre, Runcorn Centre and Irvine Centre – this paper highlights the important role that

⁵ Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia*, 2.

⁶ Alexander, *Britain’s New Towns*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸ Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia*, 206.

private actors (in this case property developers) played in the formation of the post-war British welfare state. It also explicates the lofty societal ambitions that underpinned these New Town megastructures, and pinpoints the precariousness of partnerships between public and private actors in the development of such herculean urban projects.

The Queen

In 1972, for the first time in nearly fifty years, a reigning monarch visited Runcorn.⁹ On Friday May 5th, Her Majesty the Queen travelled to the (then) newly established New Town sixteen miles west of Liverpool to formally open Shopping City¹⁰ – a 900,000 square ft. shopping centre designed by David Gosling under the supervision of Lloyd Roche. Sited in a bucolic valley just south of Halton Village at the heart of Runcorn's new 'figure of eight' expressway system and entirely clad in 'self-cleaning white ceramic tiles,' this commercial colossus summoned an alien aircraft that had docked on Earth.¹¹ Topped by tall service towers that stood blankly staring like a bevy of gargantuan Ned Kellys, it did not fail to astound, and was commended by the sovereign as an 'impressive development in the organisation of urban life.'¹² (Figure 01)

Gosling and Roche commenced the design of the Town Centre in 1966, two years after Runcorn was formally designated a New Town.¹³ The initial intention was to combine the bulk of the town's communal functions in one recognisable, multifunctional, multi-deck megastructure, with a large shopping centre at its heart. To provide for ground floor servicing, the shopping centre was raised twenty feet above ground, and was connected – through a

⁹ 'A Royal Visit Colour Supplement,' *Runcorn Weekly News*.

¹⁰ 'Queen to Open Shopping City on One Day Tour,' *Runcorn Weekly News*.

¹¹ 'Runcorn Main Shopping Centre,' *The Architects' Journal*, 1382.

¹² 'A Royal Thank You,' *Runcorn Weekly News*.

¹³ Arthur Ling, *Runcorn New Town*.

system of pedestrian bridges – to a civic zone to the north, which was to house a library, bus station, courts of law, a police station and commercial offices; an educational area to the east, which included a technical college; and an entertainment hub to the south that featured a museum, dance hall, youth centre, cinema, theatre and sports facilities. (Figure 02)

The overall structure of Runcorn's Town Centre was based on an isotropic, expandable 108ft 'supergrid,' which was dominated by a more finely grained 18ft square lattice at the level of infill and construction.¹⁴ Hovering over parts of the Town Centre (including the central shopping area) was a linear system of housing units. These were accessed through service towers placed on the nodes of the supergrid and extended beyond the Town Centre towards the south and west where they were to anchor the milky megastructure into soon-to-be-developed housing areas. (Figure 03)

This was 'architecture for the space age.'¹⁵ With its sky-bridges, vertically segregated (yet intricately woven) multi-modal transportation system and its rich mix of functions that promised unabated activity, Runcorn's Town Centre was a wet dream for cyberneticists, modern architects and post-war planners alike. And yet, for all its visionary zeal, the scheme was also firmly rooted in reality. From the 1960s, the growing American-inspired consumer culture filled many European intellectuals with fear; fear that Europe's active, rational citizens who were both socially and politically engaged, would be replaced by a herd of passive, witless and self-centred consumers, who were unable to distinguish their 'true' needs from their 'false' wants. According to historian Victoria De Grazia this resulted in a 'conflict between the European vision of the social citizen and the American notion of the sovereign

¹⁴ 'Runcorn Main Shopping Centre,' *The Architects' Journal*, 1378.

¹⁵ Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia*, 254-96.

consumer.’¹⁶ The Runcorn Town Centre scheme formulated a response to this conundrum. Informed by the unwavering belief that the physical structure of cities could transform society, it sought to mediate between ‘citizens’ and ‘consumers,’ and cleverly combined commercial pursuits (shopping) with more earnest civic, administrative and educational activities to forge a new collective: a collective of ‘consumer-citizens,’ famously labelled ‘the children of Marx and Coca-Cola’ by the French-Swiss film director Jean-Luc Godard.¹⁷

The original intention was that Runcorn’s Town Centre would be carried out entirely by the Runcorn Development Corporation (RDC); an independent governmental body established in 1964, which was responsible for the building and management of the New Town.¹⁸ However, in light of the (then) economic situation – including restrictions on public spending¹⁹ – it soon became clear that private finance had to be attracted for the construction of the Town Centre.²⁰ So, by the end of 1966, shortly after the basic design principles for the Town Centre had been established, the RDC reached an agreement for the financing of a large part of the project with Grosvenor Estate Commercial Developments Ltd.²¹ Reminiscing about Shopping City’s history shortly before its opening, a local newspaper spoke of a ‘brief courtship’ that had ‘culminated in a marriage between the New Town Development Corporation and private enterprise [Grosvenor Estate] on a scale which had not previously been seen [...]’.²²

¹⁶ De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 342.

¹⁷ De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 342-3.

¹⁸ Hall and Tewdwr-Jones, *Urban and Regional Planning*, 68-71.

¹⁹ ‘Runcorn Main Shopping Centre,’ *The Architects’ Journal*, 1378.

²⁰ Aldous, ‘Runcorn Report.’

²¹ Hutchin, ‘Courageous £ 10m Shopping City Confounds Critics.’

²² ‘Shopping City a Developer’s Dream,’ *Weekly News Group on Merseyside*.

A property group originally established in the 17th century and in the 1960s, when Runcorn was developed, owned by Robert George Grosvenor, the 5th Duke of Westminster, Grosvenor Estate agreed to finance and let the commercial component of the Town Centre, while the RDC remained as ground landlord.²³ The rent, it was decided, would be subject to review in light of trading profit.²⁴ Once this accord had been reached, Grosvenor Estate ‘employed’ the RDC’s design team to implement the scheme, retaining their own architect and quantity surveyor as consultants only.²⁵

Nonetheless, while entrusting the RDC with the design, Grosvenor Estate did become quite involved in the development process, and retained a say in design decisions, as was noted in the ‘architect’s account’ published in the *Architects’ Journal* shortly after Shopping City’s inauguration.²⁶ In the late 1960s Kenneth Eyles, the managing director of Grosvenor Estate had for instance, accompanied Lloyd Roche, the RDC’s Chief Architect and Planning Officer to the US and Canada to visit shopping centres.²⁷ Upon their return, and following the request of Grosvenor Estate, certain alterations were made to the design, most importantly: the removal of the overhead ‘deck’ housing units.²⁸ (Figure 04)

In the *Architects’ Journal* of June 1972, Peter Smith gave a mixed appraisal of Grosvenor Estate’s contribution to the project. While he conceded that ‘[m]uch of the credit for the effective shopping layout and letting policy must go to the developer (Grosvenor Estate

²³ ‘Grosvenor Down the Centuries,’ *Weekly News Group on Merseyside*.

²⁴ ‘Runcorn Main Shopping Centre,’ *The Architects’ Journal*, 1382.

²⁵ Smith, ‘Runcorn Main Shopping Centre: Appraisal,’ 1386.

²⁶ ‘Runcorn Main Shopping Centre,’ *The Architects’ Journal*.

²⁷ ‘Architects Aimed for High Standard,’ *Weekly News Group on Merseyside*.

²⁸ ‘Architects Aimed for High Standard,’ *Weekly News Group on Merseyside*; ‘Runcorn Main Shopping Centre,’ *The Architects’ Journal*, 1382; Shopping City a Developer’s Dream,’ *Weekly News Group on Merseyside*.

Commercial Developments Ltd) and their agents, Erdman & Erdman,' Smith was quite critical of the changes that had been made to the original design following the involvement of Grosvenor Estate. 'A comparison between the existing layout and the plans prepared by the development corporation's architects prior to the intervention of the developer,' he wrote, 'reveals that the original scheme, though less practical in shopping terms, was far more imaginative than the present layout. Surely some of the variety of scale, change in level, and more substantial planting incorporated in the original scheme could have been retained in a more effective commercial layout.'²⁹

In this statement, Smith made reference to one of the original axonometric projections that Gosling and Roche had produced for the Town Centre in 1966, which summoned an unfinished, three-dimensional game of Tetris. Among the most striking features of this visionary drawing was the relentless grid of service towers that governed all areas of the multifunctional complex: civic, educational, recreational and commercial, and that also extended into the housing areas to the south and west of the new Town Centre. Together with the more finely grained mesh of 18ft plug-in modules, this tower-grid pithily evoked the complex's unfinished, ever-expanding ethos. (Figure 05)

However, instead of constructing the shopping centre in phases, as had been originally intended,³⁰ Grosvenor Estate opted to build Shopping City in one single operation. (Figure 06) So, rather than creating a first fragment of a gradually growing supergrid megastructure with extendable overhead housing, the property group built a complete, stand-alone, fully enclosed shopping centre (see Figure 04), around which other buildings and building clusters could be (independently) constructed. One of these was Grosvenor House, an office block that

²⁹ Smith, 'Runcorn Main Shopping Centre: Appraisal,' 1385-6.

³⁰ 'Architects Aimed for High Standard,' *Weekly News Group on Merseyside*.

was also financed by Grosvenor Estate and built in parallel with Shopping City, just to its north. Although in Shopping City Grosvenor Estate retained the original grid of service towers, in Grosvenor House, it did not. Surprisingly, neither did the Department of Employment Offices (D.E.P.) building, which was also constructed concurrently with Shopping City, just to its east. As a result, and perhaps less surprisingly, the courts of law, police station and library buildings, which were erected to the north of Shopping City and immediately east of Grosvenor House not much later, also relinquished the service-tower supergrid concept.

The next piece of the puzzle that was constructed was James Stirling's ill-fated Southgate Estate.³¹ Although Stirling's scheme included grade-separation that allowed it to feed directly into Shopping City by means of a long pedestrian bridge, also this project did not comply with the envisaged supergrid of service towers. (Figure 07) This is remarkable, given that Gosling and Roche had laid down the basic design principles for the overall Town Centre scheme only shortly before Stirling was appointed at the end of February 1967.³² Finally, and many years later, a cinema opened south of Shopping City. While this large shed-like structure was at a significant remove from the more imaginative abstract and 'cubist' proposal that Gosling and Roche had drawn up in 1966, it did represent the first piece of the recreational cluster that was part of their original megastructure proposal, which was located immediately south of the shopping centre. Unfortunately, it also remained the *only* piece as the other components – such as the museum, youth centre, theatre and sports facilities – never eventuated.

³¹ Morton, *From Southgate to Hallwood Park*.

³² Morton, *From Southgate to Hallwood Park*, 11.

It seems that the abolition of the overhead linear housing units, which would have encouraged the extension of the supergrid of service-towers beyond the Town Centre, was the kiss of death for Runcorn's ambitious megastructure. Much like in a game of domino, all the other pieces – Grosvenor House, the police station, the courts of law, the library, Southgate Estate, etc. – fell over quite easily after that. Grosvenor Estate's decision not to construct the shopping centre in stages also did not help matters any. Strangely enough, in his 1972 appraisal for the *Architects' Journal*, Smith did not object to the apparent desertion of the phased megastructure concept. While he imputed the 'delicate relationship between the New Town Corporation and the developer' for the loss of some of the complex's spatial richness, he did support the Grosvenor Estate's decision not to build the shopping centre in stages, stating that 'with the benefit of hindsight and accumulated evidence from other town centre projects, it can now be seen that a disaster was narrowly averted.'³³ This was a thinly veiled swipe at Cumbernauld centre, Runcorn's older brother, and the very first urban megastructure built at the heart of a post-war British New Town.

A Princess

Located twelve miles northeast of Glasgow, Cumbernauld was designated a New Town in 1955. With only a limited area of land available,³⁴ its town centre was conceived as a dense, multi-deck, linear megastructure, and '[...] intended to be flexible in a way that [then] existing new town centres had proved not to be.'³⁵ The first phase of Cumbernauld centre was inaugurated by Princess Margaret on 18 May 1967, almost five years to the day before Runcorn's Shopping City was opened by the Queen.³⁶ To illustrate the centre's vaunted

³³ Smith, 'Runcorn Main Shopping Centre: Appraisal,' 1386-7.

³⁴ Gold, 'The Making of a Megastructure,' 114-5.

³⁵ 'Town centre phase I,' *The Architects' Journal*, 297.

³⁶ Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia*, 271.

characteristics of plasticity and extendibility, phase one flaunted abrupt ends that signalled the structure's temporary nature as it sat, perched atop a hill, eagerly awaiting the construction of the following phases.³⁷ Thus visibly different from earlier British New Town centres such as those of Stevenage and Harlow, Cumbernauld marked a new beginning, and was the first to be labelled a 'Mark II New Town.'³⁸

Apart from promoting the promise of flexibility, and thereby endless possibility, Cumbernauld centre also pioneered the unique idea – later on replicated by Gosling and Roche in their design for Runcorn's Town Centre – '[...] to place, within one single [...] structure, all the major social, commercial and shopping functions of the town, served by pedestrian ways and serviced by lower levels of car parks, roads and delivery bays.'³⁹ In addition to commercial functions, such as offices and shops, the outline plan accordingly provided for '[...] a group of entertainment buildings at the east end, such as a cinema, dance hall and bowling alley; civic building, such as governmental and local authority offices; town church and hotel in a group at the west end, plus educational buildings, fire station, hospital, health centre, further churches and sports centres around the periphery.'⁴⁰ (Figure 08)

A place like no other, Cumbernauld centre became a beacon for subsequent New Town centre development, and the darling of the architectural press – safe for a few exceptions⁴¹ – all throughout its initial planning phases, and also throughout the implementation of stages one

³⁷ Gold, 'The Making of a Megastructure,' 121.

³⁸ 'Two New Towns? First for Five Years,' *The Architects' Journal*, 455; 'Cumbernauld New Town Centre,' *The Architects' Journal*, 1283; Gold, 'The Making of a Megastructure,' 110.

³⁹ 'Town centre phase I,' *The Architects' Journal*, 297.

⁴⁰ 'Cumbernauld New Town Centre,' *The Architects' Journal*, 1288.

⁴¹ Donat, 'Cumbernauld: New Town in Tension.'

and two.⁴² *The Architects' Journal* likened it to Hans Hollein's 1964 'aircraft carrier city,' *Architectural Design* proclaimed Cumbernauld centre 'the projection of a new urban language,'⁴³ and Reyner Banham labelled it 'the nearest thing yet to a canonical megastructure that one can actually visit and inhabit.'⁴⁴ The latter could be understood quite literally, as the centre included thirty-five penthouse apartments on its top level,⁴⁵ which the *Architects' Journal* described as 'a design eccentricity,' albeit one without which '... the plan would be much the poorer.'⁴⁶ (Figure 09)

Cumbernauld centre captured the spirit of the time, and for the first time succeeded in realising some of the promises coined by visionary proposals such as Cedric Price's Fun Palace and Archigram's Instant City. It was the brainchild of Geoffrey Copcutt, who spearheaded the 'Central Area Group,' which worked under the direction of Hugh Wilson, Chief Architect and Planning Officer for the Cumbernauld Development Corporation (CDC).⁴⁷ In the early 1960s, the Central Area Group produced numerous drawings for the project, which served to evoke the envisaged hustle and bustle in the new Town Centre. These drawings revealed that rather than a 'place,' the architects aimed to create a 'destination' where a new collective of consumer-citizens could engage in not only consumption, but various other activities, including worship, learning and play. Enthralled by the Central Area Group's vision, and buoyed by the heroic photographs that circulated of phase one, the *Architects' Journal* in January 1968 accordingly declared Cumbernauld centre a 'true advance

⁴² Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia*, 272.

⁴³ Jeffery, 'Cumbernauld Centre/The Projection of a New Urban Language,' 209.

⁴⁴ Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, 287, cited in: Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia*, 274.

⁴⁵ 'Cumbernauld New Town Centre,' *The Architects' Journal*, 1286; 'Town Centre phase I,' *The Architects' Journal*, 304.

⁴⁶ 'Town Centre phase I,' *The Architects' Journal*, 304.

⁴⁷ 'Cumbernauld New Town Centre,' *The Architects' Journal*, 1279-86; Gold, 'The Making of a Megastructure,' 121.

in new community architecture'⁴⁸ that necessitated 'a new code of community behaviour.'⁴⁹
(Figure 10)

However, less than a decade later, the initial enthusiasm had somewhat waned. In the August 1976 issue of the *Architects' Journal*, Keith Smith posited that while '[t]he complex mixing of uses proposed in the Cumbernauld centre was a seductive attempt to recreate the organically developed forms of older urban centres [...] the result [could not] be claimed as a success.'⁵⁰ By this point, 'phase four' of Cumbernauld centre had just been announced, and 'phase three' had recently been completed. Even though these additions were still termed 'phases,' their designs departed radically from the initial vision set out by Copcutt and the Central Area Group.

The Woolco store built by Woolworths between 1972 and 1974 as 'phase three' was, for instance, a shed-like structure that while attempting to tie into the circulation system of the town centre, made few further concessions to follow the original design.⁵¹ When Jim and Krystyna Johnson revisited the project for *The Architect's Journal* in 1977, they wrote: 'By now [after the completion of phase three] the original concept of the town centre had been abandoned and there arose an agglomeration of individual buildings along its south side. Sports Centre, Community Centre, District Council building, Health Centre and Technical College stand on exhibition like an architectural zoo.'⁵²

⁴⁸ 'Town centre phase I,' *The Architects' Journal*, 304.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁵⁰ Smith, 'Irvine Shopping Centre: Appraisal,' 217-8.

⁵¹ Gold, 'The Making of a Megastructure,' 123.

⁵² Johnson and Johnson, 'Buildings Revisited: Cumbernauld New Town,' 644.

In an unpublished 1995 memorandum, Colin H. Cowan, the General Manager/ Chief Executive of the CDC suggested that making such allowances was necessary as the ‘unorthodox layout of the Centre, [...] did not encourage developers.’⁵³ Rather than targeting the architects’ design vision Smith, in his 1976 essay, however, pointed to the contradictions inherent in public-private collaborations for Cumbernauld centre’s somewhat sorry state. ‘Perhaps there are too many physical and financial factors which mitigate against successful integration of large scale developments?’ he asked, and continued:

Planning a modern centre involves not only the provision of shops and offices generally by private finance, but frequently also the needs of local and/or central government. Public and private clients can be extremely uneasy bedfellows. The developer may wish to carry out a programme as quickly as possible, to minimize interest on his capital outlay while the building is under construction; at the same time he has to hold together a mixed bag of prospective tenants. Those parts of the development by public authorities, especially the social and cultural facilities are completely at the mercy of the economic and political barometer. These forces are powerful ones and to ignore them is to misunderstand the present organisation of society.⁵⁴

A ‘No Show’

Keith Smith’s gloomy 1976 assessment of Cumbernauld centre was given in light of the opening of the first phase of another New Town centre megastructure elsewhere in Scotland. Bordering the Firth of Clyde twenty-three miles southwest of Glasgow, Irvine was designated a New Town in 1966. The following year, architects Wilson & Womersley prepared a masterplan, which proposed to build Irvine’s new town centre on a green field site. However, geological surveys revealed that extensive areas of the New Town were susceptible to mining

⁵³ Colin H. Cowan, ‘Individual Thoughts on Cumbernauld Town Centre’ (unpublished memorandum), cited in: Gold, ‘The Making of a Megastructure,’ 123.

⁵⁴ Smith, ‘Irvine Shopping Centre: Appraisal,’ 217-8.

subsidence. And so, also taking into account the western expansion of Kilmarnock and the development of a deep-water port at Hunterston, subsequent revisions of the masterplan shifted the location of the New Town centre to the old burgh of Irvine, which already had existing facilities and offered coastal possibilities.⁵⁵

While a more desirable location for the new town centre, the old burgh of Irvine was, however, not without problems. It was split in two by the Irvine River – the commercial centre was on the east bank, and the railway station along with run-down housing and a decaying harbour area were on the west bank. As a result, by the 1960s, when Irvine was designated a New Town, the old Irvine Bridge linking the two sides of the town was congested by through traffic. The final masterplan, dated January 1971, accordingly proposed to create a road bypass that diverted through-traffic away from the old town centre, to open up possibilities to rethink the bridge. Drawing on inhabited bridges of medieval European cities – historic megastructures in their own right⁵⁶ – Wilson & Womersley proposed to replace the old Irvine Bridge with an enclosed shopping mall spanning the Irvine River.⁵⁷ (Figure 11)

This shopping mall was to be built in three phases. The first phase spanned the River Irvine and, other than retail, contained offices, a cinema and a hotel. The second phase comprised an extension of the main shopping complex on the west bank as well as an office tower, and the third phase was to extend the shopping centre to the existing railway station.⁵⁸ Itself no small feat, this shopping centre was but one fragment of a larger megastructure that (much like Cumbernauld centre) relied on a linear system of growth. It would widen and narrow as it

⁵⁵ Strawhorn, *The History of Irvine*, 216.

⁵⁶ Gold, 'The Making of a Megastructure,' 111.

⁵⁷ 'The End of Irvine Bridge,' *The Irvine Herald*.

⁵⁸ 'Town Centre Trend,' *The Architects' Journal*, 528.

traversed the town, and connect the old commercial centre and new office development in the east, with a modern leisure centre along the harbour in the west by means of a narrow high-density strip of upper-level, harbour-side housing.⁵⁹ (Figure 12)

The sketches that were prepared for the various segments of Irvine's new town centre were reminiscent of those that accompanied publications on Cumbernauld centre. They presented a consciously designed environment featuring high-impact advertising, pop art and a social mix of mod shoppers enjoying a consumer dream world. (Figure 13) According to Wakeman, these drawings presented Irvine's new megastructure as an upbeat emblem of the sixties youthful middle classes, and betrayed a design strategy aimed at enhancing consumerism.⁶⁰ But consumption was not the *only* keynote of the various presentation drawings that were prepared for Irvine's new town centre. Leisure, play, and even a hint of 'Debordian' *derivé* were also prominently present – a testament to the Irvine Development Corporation's (IDC) desire for citizens to spend their free time in a meaningful manner – because more than creating consumers, the aim was to shape a community of consumer-citizens.⁶¹

In January 1973 plans for the new harbour-side leisure centre, which was one of the first component's of Irvine's new urban megastructure to be built on the west bank, were revealed.⁶² Designed by architect Ian Campbell, it featured a large hall, gymnasium, fitness and health salon, ice rink, bowls hall, 300-seat theatre, three squash courts, shooting range, play area for children, swimming pool, teaching pool, first aid room, sauna suite, cafeteria and

⁵⁹ *Irvine New Town Plan*, 230-45.

⁶⁰ Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia*, 275-6.

⁶¹ Gosseye and Heynen, 'Architecture for Leisure in Post-war Europe, 1945-1989.'

⁶² 'Centre of Attraction,' *The Irvine Herald*.

restaurants, bars and lounges, as well as shops and kiosks.⁶³ James Laidlaw and Sons were awarded the building contract in March 1973,⁶⁴ and by September construction was well underway.⁶⁵ The project was, however, marred by financial difficulties and by 1975 additional funding needed to be sourced to keep construction going. By then, also the cost of running such an ambitious leisure centre became increasingly contentious, as the building was characterized by some local councillors as a ‘millstone’ around ratepayers’ necks.⁶⁶

To make matters worse, in October 1973, soon after construction on the leisure centre had commenced, *The Irvine Herald* reported that ‘the imaginative scheme to continue the link up of old and new shopping centres not only across the river but right down to the harbour mouth [where the leisure centre was located] appears to have been abandoned.’⁶⁷ The weekly explained that this part of the plan had been dropped because ‘houses are no longer considered viable here as the semi-derelict industrial land on which they were to be built would have to be acquired at market value.’⁶⁸ However, other newspaper reports suggest that objections to the futuristic scheme by the Irvine Town Council and local residents played a role as well.⁶⁹

⁶³ ‘Something for Everyone at New Leisure Centre,’ *Irvine Times*.

⁶⁴ ‘Leisure Contract Awarded,’ *The Irvine Herald*.

⁶⁵ ‘Work Now... Leisure Later,’ *The Irvine Herald*.

⁶⁶ ‘Leisure Centre will be Millstone Around Council’s Neck, Councillor Warns,’ *Irvine Times*; ‘Shock £1/2m Rise in Leisure Centre Costs,’ *Irvine Times*; ‘Council Want Probe into Leisure Centre Cost,’ *Irvine Times*; ‘Leisure Centre Cost Rockets to £3m,’ *Irvine Times*; ‘Leisure Centre Costs Soaring,’ *Irvine Times*; ‘Councillors Angry over Leisure Centre Commitment,’ *Irvine Times*; ‘Leisure Centre Bombshell,’ *Irvine Times*; ‘Plea for Showpiece Leisure Centre to Open Despite Cash Problems,’ *Irvine Times*.

⁶⁷ ‘A Planners’ View of Irvine,’ *The Irvine Herald*.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ ‘Council Reject I.D.C. Plan for 400 “Living Units”,’ *The Irvine Herald*; ‘Harbour Street Row... “Concrete Jungle” says M.P.,’ *The Irvine Herald*.

But, *The Irvine Herald* also had good news to report. ‘On the positive side,’ the weekly announced in the same October 1973 article, ‘the most successful feature of the New Town Plan [...] the new shopping centre [...] is [...] going ahead to the corporation’s design, through a partnership agreement with a private developer (a similar arrangement to Runcorn) [...].’⁷⁰ The IDC had indeed drawn valuable lessons from the development of Runcorn’s Shopping City and had struck a deal with a private developer, Ravenseft and Murrayfield Scottish Developments, early on, in February 1972.⁷¹ Under the terms of the agreement, Ravenseft and Murrayfield would carry out the phased construction of the shopping centre and would pay the IDC a rental fee for the whole site. Once the shopping centre was constructed a rent review would take place, and the income shared between Ravenseft and Murrayfield, and the IDC.⁷²

This was, however, not the only thing that ‘Irvine Centre,’ as the shopping centre was called,⁷³ had in common with Runcorn’s Shopping City. Also here, Edward Erdman was engaged as letting agent⁷⁴ and, more importantly, like in Runcorn, David Gosling had played a key role in the centre’s design. In 1968 Gosling had left the RDC to take up the position of Chief Architect and Planning Officer at the IDC.⁷⁵ There, after he and his team had prepared a preliminary design for the shopping centre, thirty development companies were invited to discuss the scheme and assess its commercial viability. A short list of four⁷⁶ was selected to submit implementation proposals based on the preliminary design, and Ravenseft &

⁷⁰ ‘A Planners’ View of Irvine,’ *The Irvine Herald*.

⁷¹ ‘New Town Centre Agreement Takes Irvine into the 21st Century,’ *Irvine Times*.

⁷² ‘New Town Centre Gets Off the Drawing Board,’ *Irvine Times*.

⁷³ ‘It’s All in the Name,’ *The Irvine Herald*.

⁷⁴ ‘Shoppers will find New Standards of Luxury and Comfort,’ *The Irvine Herald*.

⁷⁵ Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia*, 275.

⁷⁶ “‘Goldmines’ in the New Shopping Area,” *The Irvine Herald*; Smith, ‘Irvine Shopping Centre: Appraisal,’ 218.

Murrayfield were eventually chosen. Then, like in Runcorn, the development corporation's design team was retained to adjust the scheme to suit the particular requirements of Ravenscroft & Murrayfield, while an outside firm of quantity surveyors were appointed to facilitate its construction.⁷⁷

To what extent Ravenscroft & Murrayfield amended the design is unclear. However, Keith Smith's comment that the company had been '[...] an important contributor to the design of the scheme, accepting unusual and adventurous ideas and paying for them,' suggests these may have been minor. As a result, Smith enthusiastically proclaimed, '[t]he [Irvine] shopping centre has made an important architectural contribution to the concept of megastructures.'⁷⁸ Even so, he did reserve a few critical asides regarding the failure of the IDC to attract investors to construct the cinema and hotel, which were meant to have been part of the shopping centre's first phase. He also pointed to the 'unfortunate contrast' that the temporary end to the shopping centre on the west bank presented to 'the liveliness' of its east end, and expressed the hope that 'the objective of the plan to link and unify two previously separated parts of the town will be realised.'⁷⁹

His hope was in vain. First, construction of the second phase of Irvine Centre took some time to materialize, and when it did, the original megastructure concept had been abandoned. Instead – much like in Cumbernauld centre's third phase – a collection of shed-like additions were built that, while listlessly attempting to connect to the existing circulation system, made few further concessions to follow the original design. Secondly and most crucially, phase three, which would have connected Irvine Centre to the railway station, was never built. With

⁷⁷ 'Irvine Shopping Centre,' *The Architects' Journal*, 213; Smith, 'Irvine Shopping Centre: Appraisal,' 218.

⁷⁸ Smith, 'Irvine Shopping Centre: Appraisal,' 221.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

this key connection missing, and with the housing strip that was to create an elevated pathway from the railway station to the harbour already abandoned, the new leisure centre, lay disconnected from the rest of the town. As a result, the building was recently demolished and replaced by a new leisure centre adjoining the town hall in the heart of the old borough.

Enthusiasm for Irvine's town centre project, however, appears to have dissipated long before it became clear that Irvine's ambitious serpentine megastructure would not materialize. The opening of Irvine Centre on 9 October 1975, for instance, went by unnoticed. The Queen did not come, nor did a princess. In fact, no member of the royal family travelled to Irvine, as no official opening ceremony was organised, leading the *Irvine Times* to headline: 'No Show as Shopping Bridge Opens.'⁸⁰ (Figure 14/15)

The Blame Game

Combining mass consumption with administrative and civic functions, thereby blending the concepts of 'shopping centre' and 'city centre,' the three New Town megastructures discussed in this paper perfectly embodied the welfare state's belief that capitalism could neither live with nor without the existence of a pervasive welfare system and vice versa. All three were developed through public-private partnerships, and all three demonstrated a desire to shape a new civic realm; a place where the emerging new town middle classes could congregate, a destination for a new community of consumer-citizens. And yet, their lofty ambitions were never fully realised. Blame was commonly placed on developers, but some authors suggested that architects were not free of guilt either:

⁸⁰ 'No Show as Shopping Bridge Opens,' *Irvine Times*.

In that triumvirate of blame and excuse for bad architecture, developers have frequently been seen as villains, along with town planners and building control officers. This is part of the mythology of property development. Much of the blame lies with architects themselves, pulling out standard and mundane solutions, so often crude and insensitive. If some developers have had easy profits, so have many of their architects who have too easily played out existing prejudices, rather than exploring new design approaches with their client.⁸¹

However, looking at the schemes for Cumbernauld, Runcorn and Irvine, one would be hard-pressed to accuse the architects of lacking imagination and, considering what *was* built, it would be equally unfair to suggest that developers and development corporations lacked the verve to tackle ambitious schemes.

So, who or what was to blame? The evidence points to the nexus between the public-private alliance and the ambition of the schemes. While the concept of an expandable megastructure was a good idea in principle to flexibly respond to changing social, political and even economic circumstances, Keith Smith's assessment that public and private sector work to different timetables was correct: developers generally wanted speed, while the public sector needed time to amass the necessary support and finance. As a result, these phased public-private-partnership developments often took longer to realise than anticipated; the commercial component was (almost invariably) built first, while the entertainment, civic, educational and public housing components often took more time. In the interim, opposition to the scheme by the public/local council(s) had (sometimes) mounted and, by the time that the public components were built, the social, political and economic landscape had (indeed) often changed, as had architectural culture. As a result, later phases of the megastructure often departed from the original concept, while some were abandoned altogether.

⁸¹ Smith, 'Irvine Shopping Centre: Appraisal,' 221.

Also remarkable about all three projects is that somewhere along the line in the development process the ‘brains’ behind the project left. In February 1963, shortly after Cumbernauld Centre had commenced construction, Geoffrey Copcutt quit the project, leaving his successors Philip Aitken and Neil Dadge to implement the scheme following his design under the supervision of Dudley Leaker. Leaker himself was a replacement for Hugh Wilson, the CDC’s original Chief Architect and Planning Officer, who had left in October 1962.⁸² Similarly, in Runcorn, David Gosling left the RDC in the late 1960s and was succeeded by Keith Smith. In August 1970, Lloyd Roche, Chief Architect and Planning Officer of the New Town also left the RDC to become Director of Design and Production in Milton Keynes.⁸³ He was replaced by Roger Harrison.⁸⁴ Finally, in Irvine, David Gosling resigned as Chief Architect of the IDC in November 1972, and was succeeded by John Billingham the following year.⁸⁵ As a result, a new group of architects was charged with executing a design that was not theirs to start with. And so, as time passed and the initial enthusiasm for the project dampened, all that remained was the adopted child from a loveless marriage between what were ‘uneasy bedfellows’ to begin with.

⁸² Gold, ‘The Making of a Megastructure,’ 121.

⁸³ ‘New Town’s Chief Architect Leaves in August,’ *Runcorn Guardian*; Gosseye, ‘Milton Keynes’ Centre’.

⁸⁴ ‘Roger Steps Up to Take Top New Town Post,’ *Runcorn Guardian*.

⁸⁵ ‘I.D.C. Chief Architect Resigns,’ *The Irvine Herald*; ‘Man Who Laid the Foundations Leaves New Town,’ *Irvine Times*; ‘New Town Planner Leaves the Drawing Board for the Mortar Board,’ *Irvine Times*; ‘Chief Planner Appointed for New Town,’ *Irvine Times*.

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