

# New Towns' Future

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lative competition of shopping and commercial centers and other new housing that capitalized parasitically on the location and sapped their appeal and support.

All this leads to one conclusion: It is time for this country to decide whether it wants its new-communities programs to work or not. The record makes it seem that almost everything possible has been done or condoned to make the new towns fail, in collusion with accidents of the economy.

The studies of what has gone wrong that are being prepared now by public and private agencies will not substitute for the realistic coordination of all controlling factors and an equally realistic commitment to success. The present program has built in a kind of failure that can satisfy no one but the cynics and the speculators.

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Never have an ideal and a reality been farther apart than in this country's new towns program. The premise that rational, planned development makes more sense than wasteful, chaotic sprawl—in terms of money, efficiency, energy and community and natural resources—remains sound. No one disputes the desirability, and even the necessity, for some order and amenity in this country's growth and land-use patterns. But never has a program of such obvious virtues failed so miserably.

That failure must be read as a lesson, not as *finis* to the idea. The default of seven of 13 Federally-backed new towns is the result of both predictable and unpredictable factors.

The crucial factor was timing. The Federal new-communities program got under way just as the bottom fell out of the real estate market. New towns were not the only real estate casualties of the recession; the same conditions brought down the New York State Urban Development Corporation, the real estate investment trusts backed so heavily by banks, and almost all other construction activity. Housing production and housing purchasing power were virtually destroyed by a combination of economic downturn, appallingly inflated construction costs and inflation-depleted incomes.

But still other factors complicated that highly visible debacle of the new towns. The Federal program itself was a model of vacillation and instability, with revolving-door administrators, changing directives, diminishing commitment and bureaucratic delays. Compounding the economic crisis, this program could not have been more destructive if it had been calculated sabotage.

Even so, Federal participation was a belated recognition of the fact that the real estate business, which deals in fast capital turnover, could never undertake long-term, large-scale community investment without help. Now, in a kind of self-fulfilling disaster, builders cannot pay back the loans the Government guaranteed, and the towns cannot be carried far enough to begin to yield a return.

There is a lesson in that failure, too. Britain's new towns, totally financed by the Government, which considered their construction a top national priority for the future, have had 25 years to mature. They are now impressively, even spectacularly, profitable.

But even without this fatal one-two punch of bad economics and bad administration, the American program had serious strikes against it. In Europe, new-towns legislation also controls the siting of commercial and industrial facilities. In the United States, the struggling new towns have been battered by the specu-

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