



Building the Brasilia of the North: T Dan Smith and Wilfred Burns in 1960s Newcastle upon Tyne

John GRIFFITHS, Postgraduate Research Student
University of Northumbria, United Kingdom
johnfrancisgriffiths@hotmail.com

The city of Newcastle upon Tyne, in north-east England, has for centuries been the metropolis of its region, but by the mid twentieth century it was, in the words of the city's socialist leader, T Dan Smith (1915-93) "the dying heart of a decaying region". Smith became leader of Newcastle council in 1959 and launched an energetic program of civic renewal, aimed not only at improving Newcastle for its own sake but as the mainspring for regenerating a region dominated by declining heavy industries. The culmination of his program was the plan for the reconstruction of central Newcastle produced by Wilfred Burns, the newly appointed chief planning officer, who previously worked on the reconstruction of Coventry.

This paper will examine the nature and significance of Burns' plan, launched in 1961, and the transatlantic influences it drew upon. The proposed new city was popularly - sometimes mockingly - referred to as 'the Brasilia of the North' (a phrase coined by the city's Lord Mayor), but the actual plan was far from embodying the tabula rasa planning implied by that analogy. Rather, it included significant protection for historic environments and anticipated conservation laws introduced later in the decade. It also sought, by its layout, to emulate the medieval city with its walls, motorway 'moats' defining the centre, significant 'gateway' buildings at entry points, and - drawing on Coventry precedents - quasi-monastic 'precincts' within. But it was also forward-looking, the first of a second wave of postwar city plans in Britain, and the first to suggest substantial segregation by level of pedestrian and motor traffic. In this, Burns drew upon the examples of modernist planning in Venezuela and on the unexecuted 1956 plan for Fort Worth, Texas, by the architect/planner Victor Gruen. But this new 'Brasilia' was more than Burns' physical plan. Smith sought to create a lively and modern city which would attract new industries and new thinking, and to do so involved more than spatial re-ordering. Newcastle, under Smith's brief leadership (1959-1965) launched policies on the environment (pioneering clean air legislation, and moves to clean up the industrial River Tyne), housing (a massive slum clearance program), sport and recreation, arts (including the formation of Britain's first regional arts association) and education. The 'knowledge economy' is acknowledged today to be an important driver of urban economies; this was recognized by Dan Smith in the 1960s, and the formation of an independent University of Newcastle, and the combination of the city's colleges on a city centre site (ultimately to become Northumbria University) were keystones of his policy. The physical legacy of Smith's plans has been challenged, and because of his subsequent imprisonment for corruption offences, his political significance has been distorted or ignored. But in rebuilding the regional capital, Smith sought to move away from the legacy of the nineteenth century. Twenty-first century Newcastle reflects his achievements.

KEY WORDS: City centre redevelopment.