

The Cumbernauld New Town Research and Inventory Project, 2006–9

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Cumbernauld New Town, designated in 1955 and built in 1957 with an initial target population of fifty thousand, was the most ambitious venture in Scotland (and Britain) of the second generation of post-1945 new towns.

DESPITE being a multi-award winning urban design in the 1960s (receiving the acclaimed American Institute of Architects R.S. Reynolds Award for Community Architecture in 1967), the town has suffered from poor economic investment when compared to earlier indigenous “Mark I” New Towns, such as East Kilbride, begun in 1947, and Glenrothes, in 1948. The disbanding of its original politically powerful governing development authority (Cumbernauld Development Corporation) in 1993, amidst a general anti-modern movement cultural climate, has left Cumbernauld with a notorious reputation as one of Britain’s most reviled products of postwar modern movement architecture and planning.

IN A PERIOD of unprecedented innovation in architecture and planning, the town, and in particular its high-profile megastructural Town Center (planned in 1959 and built 1963–67), attracted the interest of the international design press, but although it remained internationally prominent in elite architectural debates in the mid-1960s and 1970s (overlapping with the early period of construction), opinions within the architectural world began to slide from positive to negative in the mid-1960s. Despite criticism, the popular ‘perception’ of the town remained positive into the late 1980s, but by the early

LA VILLE NOUVELLE DE CUMBERNAULD, CONÇUE EN 1955 ET CONSTRUITE DEUX ANNÉES PLUS TARD, FUT L’INITIATIVE LA PLUS AMBITIEUSE MENÉE EN ÉCOSSE (ET EN GRANDE-BRETAGNE) EN MATIÈRE D’URBANISME APRÈS LA SECONDE GUERRE MONDIALE. L’AVENIR ET LA RÉHABILITATION DE LA VILLE – AUJOURD’HUI EN DÉSHÉRENCE ET HONNIE PAR SES HABITANTS – FONT L’OBJET DE RÉFLEXIONS DANS UN CLIMAT « ANTI-MODERNE » HOULEUX QUI FAIT OUBLIER COMBIEN SA CONCEPTION INITIALE ÉTAIT RÉVOLUTIONNAIRE EN TERMES D’URBANISME, DE DESIGN ET DE HIÉRARCHISATION SECTORIELLE. LE TRAVAIL D’INVENTAIRE RÉALISÉ PAR L’ÉQUIPE DE DOCOMOMO MET EN VALEUR LE POTENTIEL QUE CE PLAN D’URBANISME D’APRÈS-GUERRE RECÈLE ENCORE AUJOURD’HUI.

1990s the general media-led narrative of Cumbernauld as a “deprived” community took hold—leading ultimately to a succession of bogeyman-awards bestowed upon the town, such as the UK’s runner-up “Crap Town” in 2003. Cumbernauld’s positive international reputation had apparently been forgotten. To date, Cumbernauld New Town is unique among British New Towns in that it has not been accorded a detailed and comprehensive historical study.¹

In 2006, a three-year government-funded PhD project to examine the original vision and realization of Cumbernauld New Town was begun with two overall aims: first, to set the New Town within its wider historical and theoretical context, and second, to create a detailed inventory which would factually document the process of planning and building of Cumbernauld, identifying the main and detailed elements of the original strategic planning concept within the region, and its shifting strategy from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s.²



Fig. 1. Cumbernauld New Town, traffic sign, 1990

THIS BRIEF PAPER introduces the focal inventory element of the Cumbernauld project, and sets it within the wider context of heritage recording in Scotland and internationally. The inventory has been compiled using the Docomomo *urban fiche* methodology for inventorizing and analyzing urban ensembles and landscapes (including New Towns), via a hierarchical digital database, keyed into maps and images. The *urban fiche* format, established in 2004, was based on the highly successful Docomomo individual site register which details modern movement buildings of significance in over fifty countries. Although relatively modest in scale (it is anticipated that on completion in 2009, roughly 160 fiches will be sufficient to cover the entirety of the town), this pilot project aims to test the potential methodology for an international inventory of urban and landscape ensembles when applied and specifically tailored to a postwar New Town environment in Scotland.

It was anticipated that the inventory of the town would 'test' two hierarchies, or sets of relationships: the hierarchy of *scale* (such as town/big area/little area) and the relationship over *time* (such as the repeated layering of modern development on one site). The unique non-area clustered zoning of Cumbernauld's town plan, and the fact that its built fabric (excluding the Town Center) has changed little over fifty years, has resulted in the project ultimately focusing on the first relationship, that of *scale*.

THE TOWN sat on a low ridge-like hill to the south of the existing village of Cumbernauld, was oval-shaped in plan, and had the towering town center at the top of the ridge. The key principles of the overall town plan of 1959, drawn up by Hugh Wilson (chief architect and planning officer until 1962) were: increased density and urbanity in the clusters of residential zones (which contrasted with the spacious segregated neighborhood units of Mark I new towns); separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic; and one single town center. The residential zones formed an elongated doughnut-shape

surrounding the Town Center, and were divided into two: the north-west side on the ridge looking towards the Campsie Fells (Muirhead, Seafar and Ravenswood area zones), and the flatter south-east side sloping away from Town Center (Carbrain, Kildrum, and Park area zones). There were six industrial zones sited on the periphery of the town plan which sat within the housing area zones. In 1965, the first planned expansion created the Abronhill area: set on a smaller ridge site further to the south, it was in essence a mini-replica of the main town, with a single town center. The seven original residential zones, slotted together around the center, were, in turn, sub-divided into numbered individual development sites (most of these were under twenty square acres each). The Carbrain area zone, for example, was comprised of thirteen individual site elements: an individual element such as Carbrain 9 (1963–67), consisted of 525 dwellings, accommodating 1,766 people, in a variety of housing ranging from three-storey terrace houses to six-storey deck-access flats. The public, commercial, and religious buildings within the overall area zone were also given individual development numbers. Throughout the entire original town there were one hundred such individual developments, aggregated together under the headings of the seven area zones, and the Town Center, slotted jigsaw-like together with no real overlap.

THE PLAN of the town therefore virtually dictated a specific approach to inventorization, in the form of a simple, almost-flat inventory structure, with only three hierarchies of *scale*: the overall town; the area zones; and the individual developments (clusters of housing or individual amenity buildings). Because the town has changed little over its fifty years (excluding the much-

Fig. 2. Cumbernauld New Town, aerial view of Seafar residential unit, 1991



altered Town Center, of course), the layering of development on individual elements over *time* has been kept to a minimum: and where there has been development, it adhered to the existing footprint of the plan. Whereas the jigsaw-like structure of the area and individual zone/development plan has allowed a simple, neat inventory, it has resulted in problems in use by inhabitants.

THE INVENTORY has also highlighted the fact that, despite the town's overriding concept of a dense integrated town not split into neighborhood units, in reality it does have a distinct recognizable structure of community areas that differ from each other in terms of housing design, landscape character, and topography. There is also a sharp difference in nomenclature between the original development titles used in the inventory and the location names used by the residents. The residents of the town, who may, of course, ultimately become users of the inventory, identify their "home area" by a combination of the area zone name and the street name, although the latter have no official status in the development hierarchy of the town. Thus, for example, an

heritage situation within the Scottish government. Unlike almost all other Western European countries, the state system responsible for the recording, inventorization, and protection of historic buildings has been sharply divided between the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (undertaking recording and dissemination), and Historic Scotland (responsible for listing and, in partnership with local authorities, historic building control).

RCAHMS was formed in 1908, essentially as the first attempt within the UK to create a systematic nationwide official listing of archaeological and historic monuments on an area-by-area basis. A very wide definition was adopted: "ancient and historic monuments connected with, or illustrative of, the contemporary culture, civilization and conditions of life of the people of Scotland." The terminal date of 1707 was very late within the British context at that time, but by the 1960s recording and analysis had extended to nineteenth century buildings. State sponsored official 'listing' of historic buildings did not begin until 1947. Initially based upon a privately-funded interwar map-based inventory of groups of old historic burgh houses of 1935–39, by the 1960s and 1970s these lists became more overtly art-historical, concerned with the work of known architects and with other historically significant buildings. Eventually, and tentatively, listing of postwar buildings began, but still along similar lines: focusing on the private-practice work of elite architects. It was RCAHMS, free from conservation concerns, that set the pace for broader, expanded built-environment recording in the 1980s and 1990s to include all sorts of everyday building types and landscapes, advancing from the nineteenth century heritage to the mass post-1945 building programs now suddenly, in many cases, rendered obsolete. But, despite this extensive apparatus, no systematic program of inventorizing postwar architecture and planning schemes has been carried out to date.

IN SCOTLAND there has been a recurring tension throughout the twentieth century between aspirations to widen the scope of heritage to embrace more and more of the built environment and cultural landscape, and the practical reality of the difficulty of actually extending active preservation that far. The result has been a kind of 'leapfrogging' pattern, in which the scope of recording has repeatedly found itself much wider than the scope of preservation. The tension between broader landscape recording and the elite values of architectural preservation can be seen at its most problematic at Cumbernauld New Town. To date, only six postwar buildings have been listed in the new town area: four bespoke religious and educational buildings by the avant-garde Scottish postwar practice Gillespie Kidd & Coia, and two churches by Alan Reiach.³ Ironically, the

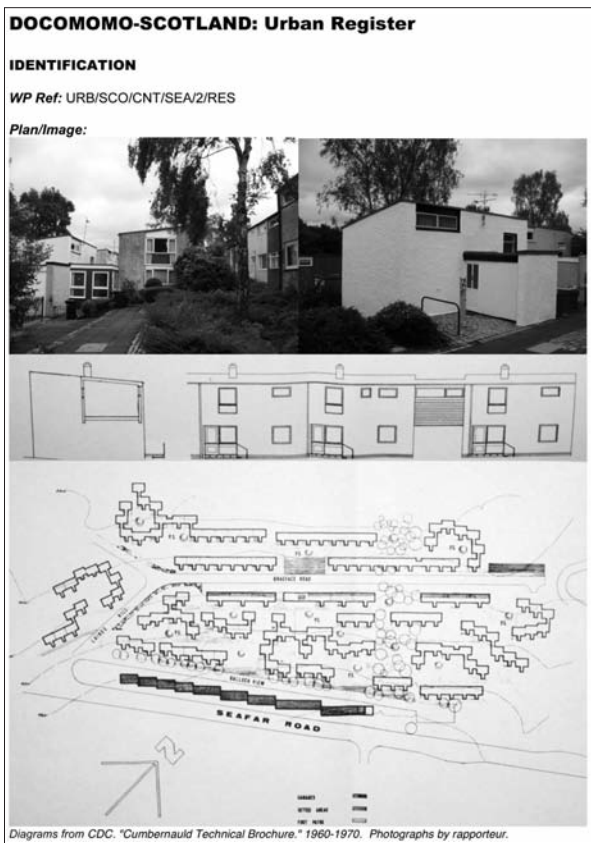


Fig. 3. R. S. Reynolds Memorial Award for Community Architecture (plaque and sculpture). Awarded to Cumbernauld New Town in 1967

address known by residents as "34c Clouden Road, Kildrum" will be identified in the inventory as an undifferentiated part of "Kildrum 17." To offset this disparity and allow such an inventory as this to be used by residents, an element of digital mapping will prove essential to the long-term impact of the inventory; this area of the project is currently being developed.

THIS MODEST PILOT PROJECT inventory is not only significant in testing the Docomomo *urban fiche* methodology at an international level, but it also potentially has a specific role within Scotland, as a systematic evaluation model for conservation protection of postwar buildings and sites, filling the deficiencies in the current government heritage 'listing' system, dominated by elite art-historical values. Here, it is perhaps appropriate to explain the almost unique

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Rapporteur/date: Jessica Taylor, June 2007

Name: Seafar 2

Variant: None

Town: Cumbernauld

District/province: North Lanarkshire

Country: Scotland

Postal code: G67

NGR: NS 7552 7482

Typology: URB/RES

Protection/date: None

HISTORY/DESCRIPTION

Dates: First handover March 1962, completed December 1963

Designers/other key agents: CDC, contractor Atholl Houses

Original brief: Briefs were not set at Cumbernauld Development Corporation in designing housing until much later in the mid to late seventies. Until that time housing types were created by considering sunlight, slope, site and the footpath and road system while attempting to keep the high new town densities set out in the Preliminary Planning Proposal.

Overall plan/context (including x-ref to area fiche): The Seafar 2, 3.5 hectare site lies to the north of the Seafar Road, to the north of which is the Wood, Lairds Hill, Balloch View and Braeface Road access the site. The sites has slopes of 1 in 7.

Individual elements (including x-ref to sub-fiches): The vast majority of houses in Seafar 2 (127 out of 143) are 2-storey split level dwellings. The two storey split level houses have an area 70.5 square metres of space. A pend study/bedroom increases the area of seven houses to 77.5 square metres providing five bedspaces. Nine terrace houses over garages each provide four bedspaces in 66.64 square metres. The roof slopes run parallel to the ground and each has its living room on the ground floor with large windows to take advantage of the views. The roofs being visually linked down the slope, an excellent feature in such an exposed site, create small sheltered spaces. These slopes also provide the maximum of sunlight. Diagonal stepped ramps and contour paths link these spaces, the whole forming 143 homes at 41.1 houses/ha accommodating 166 bedspaces/ha (55.6ppa). The houses are informal groups, ground between paved and planted to provide pedestrian route and play spaces to ensure privacy to ground floor windows.

There are no private gardens. The site accommodates 166 bedspaces per hectare at 41.1 houses per hectare.

Development: Seafar 2 developed along the lines of needing to turn a problem site to advantage, providing imaginative housing designs and a pleasant environment for those living there.

NOTES

Seafar 2 won a Saltire Society Good Housing Award 1963. The Seafar 2 houses provide the first use of the split level house in Cumbernauld, and perhaps at all. The site was put for sale in 1971.

AUTHENTICITY

Excellent condition, well maintained areas in terms of structural fabric and landscaping.

REFERENCES

Bibliography:

Wilson, Hugh. "Hill-Top Living: Housing at Cumbernauld New Town." *Architectural Review* 135, no. 803 (January 1964).

Saltire Award Winning Brochure.

CDC. "Cumbernauld Technical Brochure." 1960-1970.

"Seafar 2." *Architectural Review* 135, no. 804 (February 1964): 96.

"Seafar 2." *Architectural Review* 129, no. 767 (January 1961): 31.

Fig. 4. Urban fiche

most significant architectural and planning elements of the new town design—its layout, housing patterns, landscape, and the Town Center (the latter being part demolished and refurbished 1999–2007)—have no statutory protection, and the town's most prominent award-winning architectural innovations in design terms are not to be found in the educational and religious set-pieces of the listed and protected elite buildings.

RCAHMS, unburdened by preservation concerns, carried out a full ground and aerial photographic survey of the town between 1990 and 1991, and continued its architectural archive gathering, in anticipation of the winding-up of the Cumbernauld Development Corporation. It also recorded the painfully slow partial demise of the Town Center in 1991, 1999 and 2000. Supported by RCAHMS, the current inventory aspect of the Cumbernauld project can be viewed as a rolling-out of the former's pioneering systematic topographical recording activities. The pilot project, on completion in 2009, will provide for the first time an entire inventory of the built environment of Cumbernauld New Town—providing a much-needed, objective, back-to-basics historical evaluation, which could potentially, in turn, help counteract the onslaught of over-simplified media attacks on the town and (by implication) its residents.

DIANE WATTERS is a buildings investigator at RCAHMS, teacher at the Scottish Center for Conservation Studies, and member of the Docomomo ISC/Urbanism + Landscape. A specialist in twentieth century architecture in Scotland, she has undertaken a succession of research-based publications under the RCAHMS aegis. She wrote the 1997 RCAHMS book *Cardross Seminary*, co-edited (with Miles Glendinning) *Home Builders: Mactaggart & Mickel and the Scottish Housebuilding Industry (1999)*, and co-authored the RCAHMS book *Little Houses: The National Trust for Scotland's Improvement Scheme for Small Historic Homes (2006)*.

JESSICA TAYLOR is an AHRC-funded PhD student examining the genesis and design context of Cumbernauld New Town. A graduate of Art History at Birmingham University, and the Scottish Center for Conservation Studies, ECA, her diploma thesis focused on the conservation of postwar Soviet housing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For a full up-to-date bibliography of Cumbernauld New Town, see Miles Glendinning, "Cluster Homes: Planning & Housing in Cumbernauld New Town" in *Housing the Twentieth Century Nation, Twentieth Century Architecture* 9, 2008 (Elain Harwood and Alan Powers eds).

NOTES

- 1 The town is included in the general overview by David Cowling, *An Essay for Today: the Scottish New Towns, 1947–1997* (Edinburgh: Rutland Press, 1997).
- 2 This PhD on Cumbernauld is being undertaken by Jessica Taylor, and supervised by Miles Glendinning (Director of the Scottish Center for Conservation Studies at Edinburgh College of Art), and Diane Watters (Building Investigator at the Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Scotland—the government body responsible for the survey and recording of the built environment in Scotland).
- 3 Listed Gillespie Kidd & Coia buildings in Cumbernauld include: Sacred Heart Church, Kildrum, 1964; the now part-demolished Kildrum Primary School, 1960–62; Cumbernauld Technical College, Carbrain, 1972–75; Our Lady's High School, Seafar, 1963–64. Alan Reiach's listed Cumbernauld churches are Kildrum Parish Church, 1962, and St Mungo's Church, Seafar, 1964–66.