Constructing New Town Identity: Myth, Heritage & ImagiNation

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Abstract

Constructing New Towns or cities is more than building houses, planning infrastructure and providing jobs, it is also essential to create communities and cultivate a sense of place or *genius loci*. Using the main case study of Telford New Town, which was designated in 1968, this paper analyses the way in which mythmaking has been utilised and adopted within New Town planning over the past 50 years, and assesses the influence this has had within the British public's national psyche, described here as the collective imagiNation. This paper explores the relationship between myth and heritage within the context of rupture and change; examining how these interrelated notions *make real* a variety of identities through visual representations and public art. Branded and promoted as the 'Birthplace of the Industrial Revolution', Telford New Town demonstrates the relationship between local myths and legends and the national 'mythscape'. As the location of one of Britain's first World Heritage Sites, with the Ironbridge Gorge celebrated for its industrial achievements and the 'Great Men' which pioneered such advancements, the New Town has been mythologized through such narrative. Through the careful construction of an authorized heritage, Telford has been woven into the nation's past, present and future. It was the intention of the Development Corporation for Telford New Town to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the Industrial Revolution, to stand on the shoulders of the great industrialists of the long nineteenth century, and ultimately to ensure the nation's role, imagined or otherwise, in the 'white heat of technology'.

"Telford has associations with the past - but it represents the future" (Telford Development Corporation, [n.d.] a). This is a central and ubiquitous message which is consistently reiterated throughout the publicity literature and six hundred boxes of

ephemera associated with constructing a 'major city scale complex' (The John Madin Design Group, 1969: p.1) which are now housed at Shropshire Archives. Uncatalogued and still in the order in which the officers of Telford Development Corporation (TDC) emptied their filing cabinets and placed them into these boxes upon their closure in 1991, the TDC collection offers an insight into the internal dynamics and mechanics of New Town planning, but moreover illustrates the integral role which myth adopted within local identity construction to ensure the New Town's place within the regional and national collective imagiNation. Branded as the "250 year old New Town" (TDC, [n.d.] b: p.16) Telford epitomises myth building and its cultivation in two distinct ways; exploiting the myth of the Industrial Revolution and placing the male industrialists at the heart of this narrative, whilst standing on the shoulders of such industrial giants as Abraham Darby and Thomas Telford to create a modern heroic myth around Britain as a technological nation.

Following Telford's 1968 designation as a New Town, which can be defined as "planned communities consciously created in response to clearly stated objectives" (Galantay, 1975: p.1), TDC intended to cultivate a local identity which would marry the past and the present. TDC were keen to promote the industrial history of the East Shropshire Coalfield, celebrating that 'along the banks of the Severn at Coalbrookdale, the major technological discoveries of the 18th century were made' (TDC, [n.d.] b: p.16), yet the Corporation were also willing to highlight 'the mistakes made by industry in the past' (TDC, [n.d.] a) and their readiness to remedy the environmental consequences of the dark satanic mills of the Industrial Revolution. This glorification of the technological advancements achieved during the early 1700s and into the long-Nineteenth Century is quickly absorbed into the national 'mythscape', as Bell describes it, with Britain cementing its historical identity as a powerhouse of industry at the forefront of innovation (2003).

The Development Corporations were the bureaucratic bodies appointed by the governments of the day and were responsible for the planning, delivery and ultimately the success of the new towns. Telford Development Corporation, and later the unitary authority Telford & Wrekin Council, were quick to utilise this romanticized version of its past; recycling its identity as the 'Birthplace of the Industrial Revolution' into a sanitized heritage for use by Telford New Town's future residents and industries. This is illustrated most explicitly by the open-air industrial museum Blists Hill Victorian Town, which promises visitors the ability to 'experience life as it was over 100 years

ago through the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of a recreated Victorian Town' (Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, 2014). Having received much financial and logistical support from TDC, the heritage presented by the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust were used as a pivotal aspect in the development of the new town's identity (Beale, 2014). Yet the use of myth to create a sense of identity within this new and drastically altered landscape surpasses heritagization, with the obsolete industries, such as mining and ironwork which once dominated the geographical area, being swept into the heritage sector and replaced by modern industrial estates focusing on the 'white heat of technology', as Harold Wilson described the scientific revolution of the early 1960s (1963: p.139).

Telford New Town, and what came before it, illustrate the strength of relationship between local and national pride and how these are integrated through the use and cultivation of mythmaking. As a New Town, Telford can also be used as a case study to explore the ways in which individuals and communities negotiate their sense of place and the legacies of the past within the context of physical transformation and social change. Taking note of Ernest Renan's (1882) reflections on nationalism, Bell has also recognised the:

> dialectic of remembering and forgetting, of the need for nationalism to simultaneously have a sense of its historicity, its longevity, and also amnesia regarding the violence surrounding its (usually recent) birth (2003: p.76).

The same can be said for the use of myth in the creation of new communities; in this case a town that has been mythologized to have risen phoenix-like from the ashes of the Industrial Revolution.

New Town Context

> If the smoke and fire, the clanging of mine gear and foundry, and the pall of polluted air had largely disappeared, the blackened grimy houses and the confused broken landscapes remained. (Soissons, 1991: p.49)

This was the canvas which Telford Development Corporation inherited in 1968 when the area was designated by Anthony Greenwood, the Minister for Housing and Local Government, under the New Towns Act 1946 after it was declared as 'a place for overspill' for the growing population of Birmingham and the Black Country (Bowdler, 1955). The New Towns were prescribed as the panacea for urban poverty

which was widespread in the West Midlands cities (Ward, 1993). The area that was designated covered the majority of the East Shropshire Coalfield; made most famous by Abraham Darby's innovation in 1709 when iron ore was smelted with coke rather than charcoal, thus acting as the catalyst for the Industrial Revolution and the concept of mass production (and arguably global warming). The task set by Harold Wilson's administration was to build a new city, one which could accommodate a proposed population of 225,000 by 1991, whilst rehabilitating the diverse and polluted landscape which stretched from the Ironbridge Gorge in the south to the market town of Wellington in the north. The East Shropshire Coalfield had been suffering from long term industrial decline and the socio-economic impoverishment which inevitably accompanies downturn and decay (Baugh, 1985). This context represented an inherent reason for its designation; to ensure 'the scars of the industrial revolution should be properly healed' (Soissons, 1991: p.62), whilst providing the people of the West Midlands and the Black Country an opportunity for a better standard of living and housing; reflecting the principles of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City movement (Howard, 1902). Through inclusive and creative town planning Howard believed that he could 'raise the standard of health and comfort of all true workers of whatever grade − the means by which these objects are to be achieved being a healthy, natural and economic combination of town and country life' (Howard, 2010 edition: p.10). This thinking had developed and gained support since Howard's initial writings, with Colin Ward highlighting the importance placed upon concepts of 'environmental determinism' within mid-Twentieth Century New Town planning, which followed the believe that 'a clean, new, shiny environment would produce new, shiny people' (1993: p.10). However the area that would become Telford was neither 'clean' or 'new'. Described as a 'blackfield site' by Emyr Thomas, the first general manager of TDC, over a quarter of the designated area in Telford consisted of derelict land (5,230 acres from a total of 19,311 acres), and of this 2821 acres were covered in spoil and waste products, and a known 2957 abandoned mineshafts needed treating (Soissons, 1991: p.82).

Within this bleak milieu, the social, economic and political challenges which characterised the lifespan of TDC were forged, but moreover a strangely enduring myth was cemented within the psyche of Telford residents; one of industrial innovation driven by Thomas Carlyle's (1840) concept of Great Men such as Darby, Trevithick and indeed Telford, whilst the rupture of New Town designation was

treated with this ointment, adding the extra ingredient of modernity. Telford New Town would lead the way in technological innovation, therefore continuing to renegotiate and re-imagine the founding myth. However Telford, and the other designated New Towns, would also represent equality and opportunity for all, therefore rejecting the socio-economic context of the Industrial Revolution, and rather champion the Development Corporation's, and the Garden Cities' movement founding father, Ebenezer Howard's, desire for a socially balanced community (Reith Committee, 1946 & Ward, 1993).

New Town Mythmaking

Jean Bethke Elshtain has argued that nationalism is the 'great political passion of our time' (1998: p.25). However this thinking is accompanied by significant concern with the loss of *genius loci* across a multitude of cultural and geographic contexts, with Rodney Harrison arguing that a:

> loss of sense of place creates a need to develop and consume heritage products that bridge what people perceive to be an ever increasing gap between past and present (2010: p.25).

It is this recognition of the importance of the past that ties mythmaking to identity and the contemporary role of heritage within societies, imagined or otherwise (Anderson, 1991). Building on the work of Ross Poole, who argues that each identity, whether individual or collective, 'carries a conception of its past and its future' (1999: p.64), Duncan Bell has further explored the relationship between past events, memories and myth, and their contemporary currency. Bell postulates that nationalist storytelling relies 'on the evocative narration of the links between past, present and future' (2003: p.66) in the construction of nationalist identities. Bell has proposed the notion of a 'mythscape'; 'it is a narrative that is most likely to include inter alia a story of the origins of the nation and of subsequent momentous events and heroic figures' (2003: p.75). The mythscape is:

> The temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of people's memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly. The mythscape is the page upon which the multiple and often conflicting nationalist narratives are (re)written; it is the perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past for the purposes of the present (2003: p.66).

Within the context of a new town; where the fears of being labelled 'nowhere land' (Augé, 1995) can be extremely damaging to economic success and also widespread amongst residents, mythmaking and their advancement through publicity literature, artwork and sculpture and most explicitly heritagization, adopted a significant role within the post-Second World War New Towns. Other second generation New Towns, mainly designated between 1961 - 1964, also focus on their industrial past, with Washington New Town celebrating its 'rich mining heritage' (Washington History Society, 2014), whilst Redditch New Town chooses to remember needle-making, which by the end of the 1800s saw '95% of the worlds consumption of needles originate from the area' (Redditch Heritage, 2014). This focus on a past life of the geographical area, often mythologized to bolster that region's unique place within the national narrative, supports Peter Howard's analysis that 'historic cultural heritage [is] used for purposes of legitimation' (2003: p.41).

Indeed, Telford Development Corporation, from its inception, was critically aware of the implications of New Town status upon community identity, and the need 'to establish its future role in the region and country' (Baugh, 1985: p.18). It was the aim of TDC to provide 'the opportunity to discover a new identity while cultivating pride in the traditions of its industrial past.' (Baugh, 1985: p.19). Despite the opportunity for a 'new identity', Howard argues that inherent within this discourse, is the need for continuity, as we perceive history 'as a march of progress leading up to the present. The present is presented as the outcome of past events which all culminate in the current perfection.' (2003: p.42). However, there has been criticism levied at TDC, and later at Telford and Wrekin Council, that 'the readiness of Telford to establish its historical identity over and above that of existing communities' (Buchanan, 1986: p.474) has created an 'authorized' but inauthentic heritage within the New Town (Belford, 2011: p.54). This can be illustrated by specific case studies, such as the installation of a sculpture by TDC of Thomas Telford's mason mark on a roundabout located on the Holyhead Road, cared for by Telford & Wrekin Council. In contrast, the first inclined plane to be built in Britain was located in Ketley, Telford and was built by William Reynolds in 1788 (Shropshire History, 2015). The remains of this structure are neither preserved or interpreted by the local authority and can thus be considered unauthorized despite their authenticity. These examples reflect the decisions which were taken by TDC and offer explanation for Belford's assessment

that the development corporation constructed an authorized but inauthentic heritage for the new town.

Arguably, the heritage sector is also in the business of mythmaking; with galleries and museums choosing to display selections from their collections which are curated to highlight particular narratives. Laurajane Smith has criticised the way in which heritage has been packaged within the UK and the West more widely, describing it as an Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD):

> which privileges grand, old, aesthetically pleasing sites, all too often associated with the aristocracy, the church and comforting, sustaining, consensus fables of nationhood' (2009: p.1).

Robert Hewison famously challenged the heritage industry by arguing that 'heritage means 'anything you want'. It means everything and it means nothing' (1987: p.32). However, Smith (2006) widens this definition of heritage further, into a notion of process; making heritage a verb rather than a noun. Thus if we accept within this discourse the recognition that 'not everything is heritage, but anything could become heritage' (Howard, 2003: p.7), it is important to apply this mindset to the decisions made by development corporations within New Towns, and assess these choices in light of the national mythscape.

Telford New Town: New Life In The Cradle Of Iron

> Moving mountains, is not usually an activity associated with the development of new towns, but it has been one of the problems faced by Telford both physically and metaphorically, in attempting to transform the dereliction left by the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in East Shropshire, into a town worthy of the second half of the Twentieth Century. (Woodcock, 1974)

Telford, like the majority of the 22 New Towns and several 'expanded towns' designated between 1946 and 1970, was not welcomed by all of its existing residents. Seventy thousand people already resided within this landscape prior to the construction of the New Town. Today, almost 50 years since its designation, there are still many residents who regret the actions of the development corporation and reject the New Town, and have come forward with their misgivings to be interviewed and recorded for this research project. An example of this negative sentiment towards the construction of the New Town was articulated at a workshop of the Arleston

Residents Group, where agreement was expressed that "Telford destroyed a lot of heritage" (Respondent E, 19 May 2014), whilst another member of a similar workshop lamented that Telford "was not able to bind the past with the future" (Respondent B, 4 March 2015). Their ethos can be summarised by this sentiment: 'Until 1968 there was no town called Telford. In many ways there still is not' (Evans & Briscoe, 1995: p.1). Hewison has suggested that:

> What matters is not the past, but our relationship with it…As individuals our security and identity depend largely on the knowledge we have of our personal and family history; the language and customs which govern our social lives rely for their meaning on a continuity between past and present. Yet at times the pace of change, and its consequences, are so radical that not only is change perceived as decline, but there is the threat of rupture with our past lives (1987: p.43-5).

Hewison's assessment provides a convincing explanation for the almost diametrically opposed decision made by TDC to celebrate the industrial heritage of the area and the technological advances which had taken place within the coalfield in their publicity literature with their carefully constructed narrative, whilst sweeping the remains of this past away; using the slag as road surfaces and allowing the capped mines to become recreational areas. As TDC summarised: 'Preserving the best of that era…Transforming the bad into grassy play areas or countryside walks' (TDC, [n.d.] c). Telford Development Corporation desired the legitimacy, character and national importance which the industrial past provided their venture, without the physical remains preventing Telford from becoming a main player once more on the national and international stage for modern technology and industry. Thus the great monuments in the 'most extraordinary district in the world', as the Gorge, now a World Heritage Site, was described in 1837 by Charles Hulbert, remained, with the first iron bridge, cast in 1779 by Abraham Darby III acting as the jewel in the crown. By contrast, much of the workers' housing that was scattered across the East Shropshire Coalfield was swept away for the new estates designed by the John Madin Design Group. Perhaps not by coincidence, the majority of the built industrial heritage which has been conserved is 'helpfully located in a peripheral, difficult-to-develop, and subsidence-prone part of Telford' (Belford, 2011: p.54). Nonetheless, tangible remains of this heroic industrial past have been preserved, often *in situ* or sometimes dismantled and moved from other areas of the town to The Gorge.

Waterton and Watson propound that 'representations and visual imagery are thus intimately embedded in the mechanisms that construct and *make real* [sic] a range of imagined historic and/or mythical places' (2010: p.11). The retention of some key visual monuments from the area's industrial past strengthens and sustains Telford's role in the national mythscape. This process is supported by the visual branding that TDC adopted, and which Telford & Wrekin Council continue to utilise with much vigour. Guttormsen and Fageraas (2011) have critically analysed the way in which the World Heritage Site of Røros, Norway, produces cultural and symbolic capital within the wider discourse of 'attractive authenticity'. They note the use of a central landmark — in Røros' case a clock tower — to unify and control the correct image of the town by utilising branding to create a shared community identity. This is widespread across a variety of organisations within Telford, both public and private, which has adopted the Iron Bridge with similar verve. Telford Athletics Club, a community organisation, have adopted the symbol at the centre of their logo, whilst many private businesses across the borough utilise the bridge to sell a wide variety of products, from coffee to kitchens. Whilst capitalising upon the economic advantages which a World Heritage Site can bring to an area, this ubiquitous use of the Iron Bridge acts as a visual reminder of the importance Telford has played and continues to do so in the nation's industrial narrative.

If visual representations are key to *making real* imagined historic or mythical places, as Waterton and Watson suggest, New Towns across the country hold tangible expressions of this within their collections of public visual art. Using public art, such as sculptures and wall art, was very popular amongst New Town Development Corporations, and Telford was no exception. The towns designated under the New Towns Act 1946 'commissioned more works of art in public places from contemporary artists than any established town or city' (Ward, 1993: p.10). In a report written for TDC by West Midlands Art on the opportunities for visual arts in Telford, public art was recommended to 'create identity' and an 'identifiable 'sense of place'...by commemorating an event, a personality, a myth or local legend' (West Midlands Art, 1986: p.7). The report suggested that:

> Public art should both exploit and compliment the Town's positive and negative qualities. That is, it should make use of and reflect the new scale and space provided in building landscape and engineering projects undertaken by the corporation but it should not neglect history and tradition. It should evoke and celebrate the new modern industrial and

commercial future but it should also not forget to epitomise indigenous materials and the older industries (West Midlands Art, 1986: p.12).

The numerous examples of public art which were commissioned by TDC and can be seen across Telford attempt to bridge the gap between the old and new, and play a central role in storytelling; both of the Industrial Revolution and contemporary technological innovation. Running in parallel to this storytelling, is the rooting of such narratives within local folkloric legends to create a sense of place for those national narratives to become embedded within the local landscape. The Wrekin, a very large hill overshadowing Telford and the surrounding area, was made by the actions of a giant according to legend (Burne 1883). This tale is remembered and cultivated in the children's play facilities at Wonderland, at Telford Town Park, which is home to a sculpture of the giant making the hill (Tudor, 2000). This illustrates the need for continuity in mythmaking, and how imperative it can be to bring together locally-significant myths, with those of national importance.

Some of the most overt examples of public art in Telford which perform to the mythscape outlined above can be found on the traffic islands throughout the town. Maurice de Soissons tells the folkloric story, spread by residents, that during the planning stages of Telford:

> Planners worked long hours in conferences around a large table spread with maps and plans. They needed sustaining in the difficult work and drank endless mugs of coffee. Wherever a harassed planner put down a mug, leaving a ring of brown moisture on a plan, there they placed a roundabout (1991: p.157).

Although this tale is apocryphal, it is telling of the ways in which local residents adopted the new structures into their community; making light of the huge transformation taking place within their landscape, whilst taking ownership through the construction of narratives. Moreover, the roundabouts also tell the 'authorized' story of the East Shropshire Coalfield and later Telford, in a piecemeal yet deliberate way. There are numerous examples from across the town, mostly reflecting an aspect of the history of their immediate locus.

An overt example can be found in Madeley, one of the oldest settlements within the new town and a heavily industrialised area throughout the previous three centuries, with this 'lost' heritage, as Swenson et al (2013) describe it, being acknowledged through the installation of a replica pithead from a coalmine on a

nearby roundabout. This has been described as 'tokenistic' by White & Devlin (2007: p.49), which could be argued when placed within the wider context of the level of change experienced within the existing communities. The pithead acts as a symbol for local residents about what came before in the landscape in which they now reside, in a location which played an integral role in the Industrial Revolution. However, it can be seen as 'tokenistic' due to its lack of authenticity, but moreover because it is one of the few visual aids embedded within the environment which are left to highlight this important legacy. Yet the roundabout monuments expose a much wider narrative regarding the construction of heritage within Telford. There is a noticeable split within the variety of roundabouts across the New Town; between those depicting the industry of the past and those reflecting the contemporary status of the new town. The Donnington and Muxton areas of Telford are rich with such sculptures, with one roundabout, located near where Granville Colliery was once sited, depicting a traditional mining scene, sculpted by Gerry Foxhall. Another example can be seen in the St. Georges area as you approach the M54: the mason's mark of Thomas Telford stands proudly atop of the roundabout which forms part of the A5, which was engineered by Telford himself in the early nineteenth century. A further example can be seen along the A518, which runs parallel to where C&W Walker Ltd. Iron Works were located. This past workplace for many local people is now commemorated through the retention of its clock tower, re-positioned on a roundabout. Each of these examples illustrate an aspect of Telford's industrial heritage; highlighting the contributions made to the nation's status as the powerhouse of the world. These examples are then juxtaposed against the roundabout sculptures and monuments which acknowledge the narrative cultivated by TDC of the new town and the major employment opportunities offered within it.

Telford is also home to the Donnington Ministry of Defence base which provides logistical support to the army and plays a significant role in the development and construction of military equipment. Although this continues a long tradition of military bases and depots within Shropshire, the decision to develop Donnington as a major base was no accident — it provided and continues to do so, core employment for the New Town, in effect acting as a major hidden subsidy to TDC and arguably to the unitary authority today. This major employment centre and its important role in the success of the New Town is recognised through the installation of vintage World War Two guns on the traffic island near its entrance. Similarly, the roundabout for the

Telford Forge Retail Park located on the fringe of the town centre recognises that retail and commerce are central elements to the local economy of Telford; providing employment opportunities and economic growth. The roundabout is a modernist sculpture, representing the variety of products which you can purchase within the retail park, as well as those which are produced more widely within the New Town. This roundabout also acknowledges the foundations on which Telford, and the retail park incidentally, was built; with the iron industries and the accompanying forges recognised within its name, as well as the visual representation of the sculpture. Visible near this roundabout is a piece of authentic Shropshire heritage, with one of Thomas Telford's cast iron turnpike bridges relocated to the retail park, embedded within the landscape and treated as though it is sculptural. These examples illustrate the use of heritage, both authentic and simulated, by organisations within the New Town, whilst also demonstrating the unusual dynamics, highlighted by Belford (2011), within Telford between authentic but unauthorized heritage, and the preference for inauthentic yet authorized heritage. These examples of public art within the New Town demonstrate visual representations of the mythscape crafted by the development corporation, which weaves Telford into the longstanding national narrative as the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution and home to technological and industrial innovation.

Conclusion

Today, I would argue that this myth has been re-imagined by the bureaucrats and politicians which are responsible for guiding the future of the not-so-new town; renegotiating it within the changing context of national economic downturn, high youth unemployment and a local economy which continues to rely upon manufacturing. Manufacturing employs more workers in the borough of Telford and Wrekin than any other industry; providing employment for 13,600 people or 17.3% of the workforce (figures from September 2014). This is significant due to the annual decline, with 800 jobs being lost since September 2013 (Telford & Wrekin Council, 2014). Telford Development Corporation chose to highlight the role which this area had played within industry and manufacturing from its early days, making this its heritage to be remembered and celebrated, and for which Telford would become regionally and nationally recognised once more. This has created a political milieu which reverberates within the bureaucracy of Telford and Wrekin Council, and within

the rhetoric of local politicians, who are conscious of the need for Telford to achieve by retaining its status as a regional growth point in the West Midlands. If TDC were conscious that they were standing on the shoulders of industrial giants, the unitary authority are acutely aware of this myth which they must fulfil, cultivate and advance. This has influenced the bureaucratic and political identity of the town.

Telford New Town projects an image that builds proudly on the industrial achievements of the previous 300 years in this area, and recycles the myths surrounding those achievements as heritage. This approach, which has been adopted by other development corporations, roots the New Town in the present and provides inspiration for its future by allowing the town to have a past which residents and businesses alike can invest in. By defining, cultivating, and renegotiating such myths in the contemporary context, new communities can become interwoven into the national narrative and become partners in the nation's mythscape.

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Resident Workshops

19 May 2014 - Arleston Residents Group, Watling Community Centre, St. Giles
    Close, Arleston, Wellington, Telford, TF1 2AB

4 March 2015 - 41 Club, The Old Orleton Inn, 378 Holyhead Road, Telford,
    Shropshire TF1 2HA