



Brasilia Man: Newcastle's T. Dan Smith

Britain is playing with the idea of 'city bosses', mayors with a much stronger political role, something quite common abroad. In the 1960s, T. Dan Smith did a similar job in the NE and it was one that ought not to be repeated. In many ways, Smith was "Mr. Newcastle", perhaps having a bigger impact on the city than any other politician before or since. Originally a Trotskyist in the 1940s, he became Labour leader of the city council in 1960. He is even more famous, of course, for his fall from power and subsequent imprisonment on charges of corruption.

Both his general thinking about the city's development and specific policies he put into practice touch upon many questions about urban sustainability. More pertinently, many of today's 'development' strategies in cities such as Newcastle repeat the mistakes of the 60s. So study of what went wrong then is vital if we are to find a better way forward for tomorrow,

To be fair, there are many negative myths about T. Dan Smith. For example, he is widely reviled for the construction of disastrous high-rise tower blocks. In actuality, Smith had proposed "Operation Revitalise", the rehabilitation of existing housing, a plan that was turned down by the then Tory government. Smith also recognised the importance of keeping established communities together. Indeed, he could be said to be the father of the Byker Wall redevelopment which, at least, tried to keep people in their own community, rather than dump in some awful estate miles away.

Though he also fathered the appalling Swan House roundabout, he did try to save the famous Royal Arcade on that site for reconstruction elsewhere (the pieces were actually lost!). Smith's administration put into place the first element of today's Grainger-Dobson conservation area in Newcastle, stopping, for example, a gigantic modernist bank proposed for Grey Street, one of the country's most elegant streets.

Also in this period came the full implementation of the Clean Air Act and the construction of sewage pipelines that significantly reduced pollution of the Tyne. Smith first set in motion the programme that eventually led to today's rapid transit Metro system. He also supported the expansion of the 'cultural sector', particularly the launch of Northern Arts. The existence of two city centre university campuses similarly owes a great deal to Smith's vision that the city could not continue to depend on what he saw as inevitably dying industries.

Last but not least Smith was a strong advocate of certain valuable measures of

political reform. He supported the abolition of the House of Lords, for example. He favoured much stronger regional governance, with elected assemblies and created the first post of a council chief executive, which, whatever its merits, helped to give a certain dynamism to the city.

Modern Man

So there is much to admire in the efforts Smith put into the remaking of Newcastle. He was ahead of those who could not see that society was changing and that the city could not stay the same. But it would be wrong to bend the stick too far the other way and play down his mistakes, not least since many are being repeated today under the guise of 'regeneration'.

Of course, Smith was not acting alone. A key player in that period was chief city planner Wilfred Burns. Indeed his book *New Cities for Old* (1963) is a key text for those wishing to get an insight into the thrall of 'modernist' redevelopment. It certainly must be read alongside sobering accounts, such as Gavin Stamps' *Britain's Lost Cities* (2010), Tom Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1983) and *The Rape of Britain* by Colin Amery and Dan Cruickshank (1975).

Apologists for the monstrosities created in the name of 'modernisation' and 'development' often argue that people like Smith and Burns were just reflecting the thinking of their time. This is a somewhat specious argument since it could justify all sorts of horrors from racism to child labour. More importantly, it is a historically false.

At the time, there were, in fact, many vocal critics of what had been happening in urban planning, not least Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs in the USA. In Britain, bodies like the Civic Trust and the Victorian Society had attacked the sheer vandalism of much urban development while the Observer's Ian Nairn was making coruscating attacks on the mediocrity of post-war city planning. The celebrated poet John Betjeman also spotlighted a lot of what was going wrong (see his 1937 poem about Slough, for example). Many local people at the time opposed the new road plans and the demolition of housing that could have been refurbished.

Silicon Snake Oil

Smith's vision was flawed in other ways too. Amazingly, he had predicted that, one day, people would carry computers in their brief cases. His PR company played the critical part in getting IBM to set up in the then Peterlee New Town. Smith hoped to kick start the development of a 'Silicon Valley' in the NE. This then new industry offered, according to Smith and many after him, the road to long-term economic prosperity, not least job creation.

However reality has turned out differently, as so often with such 'fixes'. Paul

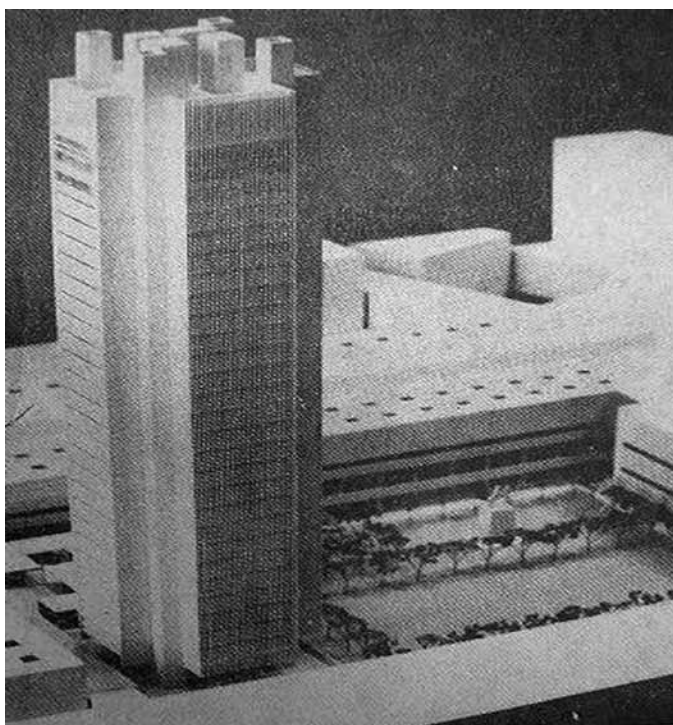
Ehrlich and John Holdren once observed that such technological ‘rabbits’ pulled out of the scientist-magician’s hat usually have large appetites and leave noxious droppings. That is certainly true of the computer industry and its products.

For instance, the growth of the Internet traffic, not least the system of giant servers as well as computer usage itself, consumes large amounts of electricity, not least in the home of Silicon Valley, California¹. According to one study, the construction of an average 24-kilogram computer and 27 cm monitor requires at least 240 kilograms of fossil fuel, 22 kilograms of chemicals and 1,500 kilograms of water – or 1.8 tons in total, the equivalent of a sports utility vehicle. According to Mike Berners-Lee, a new iMac has the same carbon footprint as flying from Glasgow to Madrid and back again ... before you switch it on.

There is also the matter of the water pollution around micro-processor plants and the unsustainable volume of so-called E-waste, with big dollops of toxic metals like cadmium and mercury being dumped.² The conditions of workers in related manufacturing plants are often poor, with serious health problems like eye-strain reported.³ Of course pay and conditions might improve but, then, those ‘cheap’ computers and assorted gadgets would become much more pricey.

Last but not least, ‘Silicon salvation’ fails the test of ‘universality’. Just imagine what all these problems would be like in everyone in China had the computer usage of an average American. T. Dan Smith might have been a visionary about the advent of portable computers but he failed to foresee the downsides of the industry he so cherished.

More destruction than by the Luftwaffe



60s plan for for giant hotel in Newcastle, never built

Some corrective balances to the popular image of the Smith years must be conceded: he was not the ‘Tower Block’ man of legend. But the fact remains that he and his co-thinkers did do much damage to the urban fabric of Newcastle. The Swan House construction has been noted already. But even more horrendous was the destruction of three sides of old Eldon Square. This could have been Newcastle’s equivalent of the graceful and vibrant squares found in the best continental cities.

The 1963 Newcastle Development Plan led to the loss of a number of fine old buildings, notably the old Town Hall and Library (the latter’s replacement was

so poor that it could not support the weight of books brought from the old one so stock was thinned out and, eventually, it had to be pulled down). Smith's 'vision' also included the giant Eldon Square mall, his contribution to the 'clone town' transformation of Newcastle. It is a veritable cathedral to consumerism. Part of the lack of real vision was the absence of natural lighting in this monstrosity, something that worsened the oppressive feeling of its interiors as well as increased energy bills (to be fair, there have been some welcome modifications, of late).

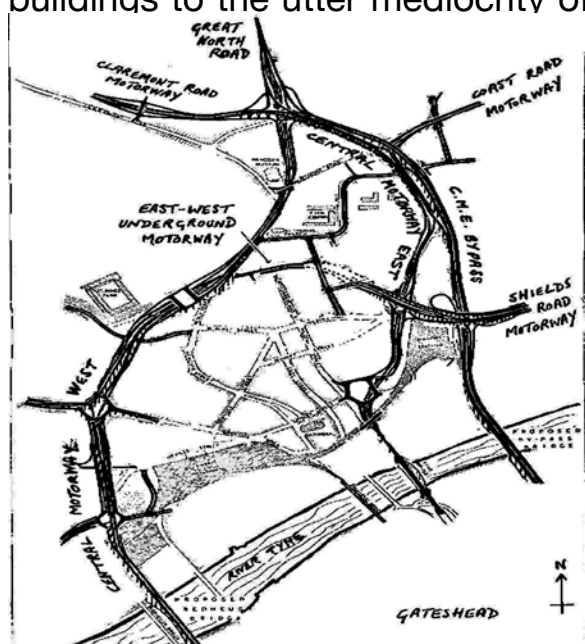


Meanwhile, bulldozers tore a path for the new John Dobson Street en route to the Civic Centre whose foundation stone had been laid in 1960. The quite ghastly Newgate Shopping Mall was opened in 1969, another failed 60s development and one, as of 2012, facing demolition. The even more brutalist Westgate House, a construction from the early 70s is mercifully no longer with us. The concrete slab that was the Bank of England building on the north side of Swan House roundabout, another Smith 'gem', was thrown up in the 60s but long stood empty until it was put out of its misery in 2012.⁴



Union Rooms and, right, the now demolished Westgate House

Actually, the lovely Union Rooms next door, revitalised by the Wetherspoon's pub chain, demonstrates that rehabilitation, not demolition, was an option for those older buildings, ones that gave the city centre its distinctive character. Compare such buildings to the utter mediocrity of most new developments, including more recent ones such as the 'Gate' complex or the ugly lump that is the Primark expansion on Northumberland Street.



60s road plan for Newcastle

But the worst part of the plans pushed through by Smith and his circle was the surrender of the city to the private motor car. Indeed, in public Smith talked not only about Newcastle as a new Brasilia but also as the 'Venice of the North', but with motorways instead of canals. So the council helped to drive the city down a dead-end road with mass commuting, mass congestion, aggravated air pollution from car exhausts and, most fatally, increased dependence on an energy source, oil, that was bound to become more scarce and progressively more

Below. old Royal Arcade demolished in 60s and, to right, the Swan House roundabout complex built over its ruins



expensive (that last trend was not ‘unknown’ at the time, having been publicly demonstrated by M. King Hubbert back in 1956).

T. Dan Smith was similarly an enthusiast backer of expansion at Newcastle airport. Again, far from being a visionary, he and many like him, failed to anticipate the unsustainability of mass aviation, even though there were radical economists like E. J. Mishan who, from 1960, had been attacking the folly of such growth-oriented strategies. Mishan had particularly singled out what he called the ‘external diseconomies’ of developments such as airport expansion. Again it is a myth that the plans developed by Smith et al only reflected a quite unanimous of what constitutes ‘progress’. It was certainly dominant but not unchallenged at the time.

It might be noted that Smith’s development strategy, like those of today, were sold on the basis that it was ‘modern’, ‘innovatory’, and ‘bold’. Yet these words are essentially meaningless. After all, Zyklon-B was a bold, modern innovation speeding up the murder rate in the Nazi death camps. The question is not change versus the status quo, which, in the case of post-war Newcastle with its widespread slums, poor levels of education for the working class and dependence on soon-to-die industries, Smith had condemned quite rightly. Rather it is a matter of what kind of change, by whose choice, for whose benefit, with what long-term goals.

So ‘modernisation’ was used as a slogan by Tony Blair (in some ways, Smith was actually a pre-echo of New Labour) to sell what was something quite different, the dismantling of public services to the gain of private profiteers. Often the claims to be ‘modern’ are phoney anyway. Take, for example, Smith’s vision of the city rebuilt around mass motoring. The east central motorway actually has its roots in a 1905 plan by John Crackett. In 1924, Robert Dick Burns anticipated others elements of Smith’s ‘vision’, including a new civic centre be built (Burns’ plan sited it in Exhibition Park, not Barras Bridge).

The fad for more new roads and for more motor cars has had some decidedly loathsome adherents in fact. Some 50 years before, Futurism in Italy had celebrated the 'shock of the new' and embraced what it saw as the great new machine age. Yet its position was wholly unsustainable and, politically, it was to nail its colours to the Mussolini's mast. The German Nazis were also very keen on new autobahns (some of the first motorways in the world) and building cars for the masses (Volkswagen).

Smith also wanted 'high profile' buildings (i.e. shiny glass and concrete edifices) but here his 'forward' thinking was nothing more than a desire to copy the architecture of places such as the USA. He regularly boasted that a world-class skyscraper hotel would be built in the city centre. (No such building ever materialised)

Any truly visionary thinking would be based on sober assessments of the challenges ahead. Smith and his associates clearly failed that test regarding their road and airport plans as well as the 'Silicon Valley' scheme (the rise and fall of 'Silicon Glen' in Central Scotland might be noted here). There is one last example of the flaws in the Smith vision. It is his strong support for university expansion.



*New physics building at Newcastle University in 1960s &, right the then Newcastle Polytechnic on Ellison Place.
The expansion of both campuses destroyed much housing.*

Gown versus 'toon'

Unlike many of his contemporaries, T. Dan Smith correctly anticipated the huge expansion of university education of recent years. His regime garnered the land that now houses both the Newcastle University and city centre campus of Northumbria University (excluding the most recent expansion of the latter). To be fair, the benefits of city living over those of life on distant campuses out 'in the sticks' were foreseen (Northumbria itself failed to see this when, later, it wasted a lot of money on the Longhirst site out beyond Morpeth).

Yet there are bigger issues here. For a start, the expansion of the then new Newcastle University and the then Newcastle Polytechnic destroyed quite a bit of working class housing, forcing previous residents out of the central city. The influx of students, which has turned into a flood in recent years, also had the effect of a social cleansing, with whole streets in Jesmond, Heaton and Fenham being turned into a student 'bedsit land', with the families that formerly lived there effectively being driven out. This, in turn, fuelled more suburban sprawl.

Most of the new buildings were, furthermore, utterly mediocre, a hotch-potch of ugliness and blandness, a tradition being maintained today, not least at the so-called Citygate complex of Newcastle University, near St. James football ground. However the really big issue is whether society actually needs so many graduates, whether the mix of university courses is an appropriate one and whether, as the ecological 'recession' depends, society will have, in future, the wherewithal (real resources, not money), to underwrite such a large higher education sector.

This is not a philistine argument for purely utilitarian courses since what is 'relevant' today can radically change tomorrow. Nor is it necessarily an elitist one: no-one benefits if the relative 'value' of an individual degree declines. It is simply a matter of asking whether society might be better served (as well as individual youngsters) if some resources were switched to, say, a programme of really generous apprenticeships in solar technologies and so forth, away from the plethora of Business Studies diplomas and degrees. It might also be asked whether the strategy of bringing over students from the other side of the world is a sustainable one, given the likely curtailment of mass travel by aviation in the wake of Peak Oil and adverse climate change.

Limits of Reformism

T. Dan Smith is, of course, most famous today as the ex-council leader sent to prison on corruption charges. 'Revisionist' historians like Chris Foote-Wood seem to have established that, basically, Smith was framed. He copped a plea bargain at his third trial, when it became clear that he would be pursued in the courts (at a time when alcoholism was getting the better of him). But the very 'Establishment', with whom he had sought to work, cheated him. Instead of the six months he was led to expect, he got six years.

It does seem to be the case that his dealings with the corrupt architect and businessman John Poulson were fairly limited. It also seems true that any monies he corruptly took were not great. Smith felt entitled to rewards for all his services to Newcastle (councillors were not paid at the time) and may have bent the rules. He was also ostentatious, not least in his taste for cars. But whatever he wrongly took was utterly trivial compared to the tax avoidance and evasion by the super-rich.

Finally, it may pay to reflect upon the Smith years and perhaps find some political lessons for today. The former revolutionary had chosen to work within the 'sys-

tem'. He really does seem to have done what he sincerely thought to be the best for his city, all the above criticism notwithstanding. To do so, he tried to 'ride the tiger' but, in the end, the tiger ate him.

Yet there are still Labour leaders like Gordon Brown who think that if they are nice to the rich and powerful, not least press barons like Rupert Murdoch, the powers-that-be will be nice in return. But ruling elites resent upstarts from below. So they eventually turned on T. Dan Smith just as they turned on Gordon Brown and the last Labour government. So there has to be a stark realism about the struggles ahead, with no illusions about the extent to which they in power in today will go to make sure they will be in power tomorrow.

That said, Smith did demonstrate what a small but determined group could do. He apparently once said that 'with six good people' he could control of the city. To that extent, small parties such as the Greens should not worry too much about the size of their membership. Proper organisation, skill and determination can open paths to power.

Of course, Smith was, to some extent, going with the flow. Mention has been made of city planner Wilfred Burns and the whole modernist drive. Less tangible was the way his rise reflected the breakdown of a 1950s consensus and its associated institutions (not least the then Tory Party) as the 60s zeitgeist began to seep through society, nationally leading to a Labour government in 1964 as well as big changes in fashion, music, and wider social mores (aided by the spreading use of contraceptive pills). Smith made the most of this new thirst for change.

Overall, Smith's political trajectory demonstrates the dangers of a 'march through the institutions' in the absence of strong grassroots support and organisation outside those institutions. He went from the City Council to become chairman of the newly formed Northern Economic Development Council. In a sense, he got lost in a maze while, outside, the dubious activities of his public relation company were making him more exposed to attack. In just over a decade, he went from proverbial hero to almost zero.

So perhaps the final lesson is the need to walk on two legs: win seats on councils and in Parliament but never neglect the need to build a strong movement outside their doors. The two must go hand in hand... and with a really sustainable vision in the head too.



Notes

1 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2007/jul/27/comment.internet>

2 <http://inhabitat.com/annie-leonards-story-of-electronics-is-an-e-waste-eye-opener/>

3 [http://www.globallabourrights.org/reports?id=0034.](http://www.globallabourrights.org/reports?id=0034)

4 http://www.timmonet.co.uk/html/swan_house.htm