

lesson learning - from liverpool to moscow...

Stephen Ward, Ian Cook and Kevin Ward look back on an important but almost forgotten exchange trip co-organised by the TCPA between planners in the UK and the Soviet Union during the 1950s



Left

Photograph taken by Frederic J. Osborn (then Chairman of the TCPA) of his fellow delegates and British Embassy guide (far right) in Moscow on their 22-day tour of the Soviet Union in 1958
Source: 'Planning Commentary' Town & Country Planning, 1958, Vol. 26 (8)

Have you seen what they are doing in city X? Is it successful? Can we do something like that? These are familiar questions in planning offices and regeneration agencies around the United Kingdom (and beyond). Learning from elsewhere in planning and urban regeneration has become a commonplace activity. Often it is with the aim of borrowing and adapting 'good practice'. At other times it is a matter of discovering what to avoid. Learning from elsewhere can involve many activities, such as surfing online, or talking to a contact over the phone, or perhaps going on 'fact-finding' visits to other towns or cities, whether at home or abroad.

Yet because the most resonant 'models' so often come from abroad (at least if you are reading this in the UK) – think for example of the Barcelona, Malmö and New York City 'models' – it is tempting

to see this quest for exotic policy knowledge as unique to our global age. In this view learning from abroad is a symptom of neo-liberal neurosis in a contemporary world where everywhere is in continual competition with everywhere else. This breeds a perpetual sense of insecurity that somewhere else is doing things better, spending less money, getting better 'outcomes', winning more investment or being more innovative. So, logically enough, if countries and cities want to survive and thrive, it becomes imperative to search out what lies behind the perceived 'success' of the high performers.

Except that all this is nothing like as unique as we might think. As historians of planning have long been aware, the conscious international circulation of policy knowledge was a key factor in modern urban planning's emergence from the late 19th

century. Its theoretical and practical foundations were laid by connecting German ordering of urban land use and density with British housing reform and the Garden City, French grand urban design, and American planning methodologies. And, of course, the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association (now the Town and Country Planning Association) was a key promoter of this circulation. Knowledge of the Garden City was actively spread across the world, conferences were organised, study tours were promoted to learn about planning elsewhere, and foreign parties were welcomed to study British Garden City projects. And so it continued. From the late 1940s things moved into even higher gear and many study tours and more specialist visits were organised, largely by the TCPA's redoubtable leader, Frederic J. Osborn.

So what was animating these earlier mobilities of planning knowledge? At times, especially before 1914, insecurities not so different from today's lurked not far beneath the surface. But, between the wars and especially after 1945, this process of finding and exchanging planning knowledge and experience often reflected rather different contexts. It was the recognition of these different experiences of 'policy tourism' that prompted the research on which this article is based.¹ Perhaps most strikingly different from today's policy tourism were those visits by British planners to the former communist bloc, especially the Soviet Union itself. These were often part of reciprocal exchange visits, whereby planners from those countries also came to Britain. This article focuses particularly on a very important pair of exchange visits of planners organised by Osborn for the TCPA and sponsored by the British Council (and, indirectly, the British Government) and the Soviet Government in 1957-58.

It was not that these were the first visits by British planners to the Soviet Union. As long ago as 1931 the architect Clough Williams-Ellis had become the first British planner to visit, prompted by his wife, Amabel, who held strongly pro-communist views. Many others visited over the next few years, although almost all these links were permeated by ideological sympathy for Soviet communism. On Moscow's side they were carefully orchestrated to showcase Soviet achievements and blind rather credulous visitors to the growing horrors of Stalinism. On the British side they were mainly organised by so-called 'friendship societies' (essentially pro-Soviet in outlook) or other left-of-centre bodies. As such they raised suspicion within intelligence circles, especially when travellers returned with glowing reports.

Some members of the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association were among these starry-eyed visitors, but it did not at this time organise its own trips. Interest was certainly growing by the mid-1930s, however, when its leaders met a Moscow delegation

which visited London in September 1936 to learn from the London County Council. It grew even more during the war years and the TCPA (as it became in 1941) reflected the rest of Britain in feeling a strong sense of common purpose with the Soviet Union in its heroic struggle against Nazism. This period and the immediate post-war years saw the friendship societies at their most powerful, widely tolerated even by Conservative wartime Ministers.

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Yet war, currency and visa difficulties prevented planning-related visits to and from the Soviet Union during the 1940s. The onset of the 'Cold War' from 1948 dispelled wartime empathy and threatened to make the hiatus permanent. However, the death of Stalin in 1953 brought a new mood, and by the mid-1950s the first signs of a distinct 'thaw' were evident. The new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, saw an easing of relations and a reduction of military spending as the key to improving Soviet living standards. He actually visited Britain, the first serving Soviet leader to do so, in April 1956. Unlike Stalin, he also felt that real policy lessons could be learnt from the West, especially in the fields of housing and planning.

For its part, the British Government was determined that the 'friendship organisations' should definitely not be the beneficiaries of these new improved links. To this end, the British Council, the main national body for cultural promotion and diplomacy, established its own Soviet Relations Committee in 1955 to orchestrate what it was hoped would be more 'normal' links.²

Housing and planning were in the vanguard of these improved Soviet relations. Indeed, the Cabinet chose Duncan Sandys, Minister of Housing and Local Government, to seal British commitment to the 'thaw' with a return visit to the Soviet Union in May 1956. It was this which facilitated the 1957-58 exchange visits organised at the British end by the British Council and the TCPA. In July, at a conference in Vienna, Osborn met Mr Koudriatsev of the Soviet State Committee on Construction Affairs and plans for these visits were discussed. In November, however, the simultaneous Soviet suppression of the liberalising Hungarian revolution and equally shameful Anglo-French invasion of Egypt to seize the Suez Canal caused planning of the exchange to be shelved, but only for a few months.

Finally, in September 1957, six Soviet planners arrived for a 19-day tour of England and Scotland. The delegation included the heads of planning, architecture and building construction bodies in Minsk, Kiev, Leningrad and Moscow and an acting Director of the Academy of Building and Architecture of the USSR, and was led by Mr S.I. Kolesnikov, the Director of the Soviet State Committee on Construction Affairs. The TCPA devised a tour itinerary focusing primarily on post-war reconstruction in towns and cities and New Town development. London, Stratford-upon-Avon, Oxford, Birmingham, Coventry, Stafford, Liverpool, Manchester, Preston, Edinburgh and Glasgow were visited, along with the Cotswolds, Loch Lomond and the Highlands. Particular attention was also given to the New Towns of Hemel Hempstead, Welwyn Garden City, Glenrothes and East Kilbride.

Khrushchev was eager to improve Soviet urban living conditions and saw satellite towns as a key part of this, endorsing British New Towns as the principal model for Soviet city planners to emulate. This was something that the 1957 visit and the publicity and official reporting that followed further reinforced. For a while there was even the prospect that a British team would go the Soviet Union to plan a demonstration satellite town or at least a *mikrorayon* (neighbourhood), but this came to nothing.

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In mid-May 1958, the British delegation arrived in Moscow for a 22-day visit. The party, led by Osborn, is shown in the photograph at the start of this article. From left to right they were H Myles Wright (Professor of Civic Design at Liverpool University), E.G.S. Elliot (Chief Technical Officer at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government), Richard Edmonds (Chairman of the Planning Committee of the London County Council), Dennis W. Riley (Chief



Above

Soviet delegates are shown plans for Glenrothes New Town by its chief architect and planner Peter Tinto (nearest camera) in September 1957

Source: *The Glasgow Herald*, 1957

Planning Officer of Staffordshire County Council), and Henry Wells (Chairman of Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation). Their trip was exclusively in the ‘European’ part of the Soviet Union, east of the Urals, taking in Moscow twice, Leningrad (St Petersburg), Kiev, Sochi, Gagra, Krasnodar, and Stalingrad (Volgograd).³

But if the Soviet party returned eager to spread the lessons of British New Town planning, this was far from reciprocated by the British party. We know a great deal about their experiences because almost all the party published their own accounts and gave lectures about it.⁴ Wider curiosity about this glimpse into what was still an ‘unknown land’ was understandable. The 1958 visit was the first time that planners had been able to visit the Soviet Union without inviting suspicions that they were ‘fellow travellers’ who supported Moscow. Yet what was striking, compared with earlier visits, was that no usable positive lessons emerged from these accounts. Wells was unusually blunt when he told an audience of chartered surveyors that ‘[i]n general the Russians have nothing to teach us on principles of town planning’.⁵ The others were more diplomatic or philosophical – Wright for example averred that the Soviet Union was going through its ‘Victorian period’ – but did not differ from this opinion.⁶

British views of the Soviet Union at this time reflected differing realities and emotions. There was certainly fear of a potential nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the West. But there was also respect for the astonishing strides in Soviet technology at this time, especially the first ‘*sputnik*’ (earth-launched space satellite) in 1957 and the first manned space flight in 1961. Economic growth predictions were also confidently (if spuriously) indicating that the Soviet Union would overtake the USA in the not too distant future. Yet while these



Above

Soviet hosts and British visitors observe a model of the proposed redevelopment of Kiev city centre in May 1958
 Source: F.J. Osborn: 'Soviet city development in 1958'⁴

were all compelling reasons to learn from Soviet experiences, the realities of Soviet urban life told a very different story. The visitors saw that Soviet achievements came at the price of a standard of living that still, 40 years after the Revolution, remained far below that of the West.

Of course, Britain itself was also changing. The arguments for centralised and comprehensive state planning which had driven the planning agendas of the 1930s and moulded the realities of the 1940s were becoming less relevant. Whereas in 1951 some 90% of new UK housing was state-developed, in 1961 it was just 40%.⁷ The collectivist impulse that had, partly by necessity, taken hold of British life in the 1940s was shifting towards an affluent (and motorised) consumer capitalist society by the 1960s. In these circumstances, American experiences seemed far more relevant than those of the Soviet Union.⁸

Yet 1958 was certainly not the last British planning visit to the Soviet Union. The TCPA set up its own well subscribed study tour for members in 1960. Others followed and other destinations behind the 'Iron Curtain' were also popular. But the motivations of the visitors were now much more those of simple curiosity. The visits were also fostered indirectly by a British Government that saw them as part of a dialogue to help ease nuclear paranoia – more cultural diplomacy than policy learning.

Nor should we underestimate the narcissistic element; reciprocal exchanges were a key way of engaging Soviet interest in British planning approaches. There were many subsequent admiring visits by Soviet planners to the New Towns. By the later 1970s this desire for Soviet engagement was embracing wider concerns to address growing anxieties about the global environment, concerns

which peaked following the catastrophic explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in 1986.

So the 1957-58 exchange visits were a form of policy tourism, reflecting quite different insecurities to those of today. Instead of neo-liberal neurosis, these visits were really part of a larger conversation to offset Cold War neurosis. They were also an unthreatening way of persuading a largely willing Soviet Union that, in planning at least, the capitalist West could hold some real answers.

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Notes

- 1 Further details of this research are available from <http://research.northumbria.ac.uk/urbanfutures/uksovietplanning>
- 2 S.V. Ward: 'Soviet communism and the British planning movement: rational learning or Utopian imagining?'. *Planning Perspectives*, 2012, Vol. 27 (4), 499-524
- 3 See I.R. Cook, S.V. Ward and K. Ward: 'A Springtime journey to the Soviet Union: Post-war town planning and policy mobilities through the Iron Curtain'. *Imagining Urban Futures Working Paper*, 2013. <http://research.northumbria.ac.uk/urbanfutures/uksovietplanning>
- 4 See, for example, F.J. Osborn: 'Soviet city development in 1958'. *Town & Country Planning*, 1958, Vol. 26 (10), 385-93
- 5 Page 378 from H.W. Wells: 'A chartered surveyor looks at Soviet Russia'. *The Chartered Surveyor*, 1959, Vol. 91 (7), 374-81
- 6 Page 177 from H.M. Wright: 'A visit to Russia'. *Town Planning Review*, 1958, Vol. 29 (3), 163-78
- 7 D.H. McKay and A.W. Cox: *The Politics of Urban Change*. Croom Helm, 1979, pp.120-23
- 8 See S.V. Ward: 'Cross-national learning in the formation of British planning policies 1940-99: a comparison of the Barlow, Buchanan and Rogers Reports'. *Town Planning Review*, 2007, Vol. 78 (3), 369-400