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Concrete bungle

Basildon is the focus of a new documentary that looks at the post-war trend of the British new town and how their decline signalled the end of a dream

The Essex town of Basildon takes a starring role in a new documentary out this week. Unlikely though that sounds, it leaves a rich impression: **New Town Utopia** is an intelligent, poignant and delicately ambiguous portrait of a place routinely dismissed as a provincial backwater. The movie can feel like a piece of obsessive, exhaustive local history, but this is also a study of the wider phenomenon of British new towns, those handful of modernist conurbations that were built, in the blaze of post-war promise, and then, over the years, fell into decline.

The film begins with the high ideals that were attached to the design of Basildon. To an uplifting synth-infused soundtrack director Christopher Ian Smith offers various views of Basildon. Architectural details are lovingly framed under a summery blue sky. It's a vision of jet-age modernity: clean, angular concrete buildings amid lush open spaces.

Accompanying this are extracts from a speech given by Lewis Silkin (voiced warmly by Jim Broadbent), the Labour politician behind the new town boom of the post-war years. We hear him describe the vaulting principles behind the design of these developments. "Our towns must be beautiful... The monotony of interwar housing estates must not be repeated."

To get a measure of how radical this is, ask yourself when was the last time you heard a politician combine social housing policy with an appreciation of aesthetics?

The tone is dreamlike, but the reverie doesn't last long. Smith interviews some of the original residents of Basildon, mostly working-class Eastenders. A few remember the town with nostalgia, especially when compared to the overcrowded slums of London. "It was like being on holiday," one old fellow declares, with an aching sense of longing.

But the best intentions were hobbled by shoddy construction: heating systems that never came on, streets that led to dead ends, a town centre reliant on the whims of big retail chains. "So much of my memory is grey," one old resident says of those early days. Smith takes us on a tour of one especially grim estate, many of its buildings boarded up, connected via gloomy subway paths: one councillor nicknamed it Alcatraz.

I suppose the decline described here is shared by many towns throughout the UK, but the trajectory seems especially painful in a new town like Basildon, whose very existence was intended to eradicate poor housing conditions. To its credit *New Town Utopia* doesn't attempt to resolve these historical ironies, but the approach can be a little too unvarying: you can only take so

many shots of Basildon architecture, no matter how exquisitely shot.

Much more eloquent are the close-ups of Smith's interviewees. One man admits that "being one of Thatcher's children... helped him". It's quite a statement, given the Labour-leaning nature of Basildon's early days and the alienating impact that the sale of council houses had in the Eighties. The agonised conflict on his face speaks volumes.

The interviewees who wax most poetically about life in Basildon tend to be in their forties and fifties.

Perhaps this melancholic nostalgia is an affliction of middle-age? Of the original female residents, there's little to be heard (a shame really, because a move to a

new town was often hardest for the women in the family). The older men Smith speaks to are generally more matter of fact. "There was no great idea I would become a pioneer of Basildon," recalls one elderly gent of his move to there from overcrowded London. "I just wanted a bath and a toilet."

***New Town Utopia* is in cinemas from May 4**

FINAL REEL

Raoul Peck triumphed recently with his haunting and fiercely committed documentary about James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*. He tackles the early days of an even more vaunted political thinker in his biopic *The Young Karl Marx*. Clearly a labour of love, this handsome portrait of Marx as a young man is too plodding to engage.



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