New Town Utopia

Utopian dreams and concrete realities…

The Guardian
The Times
The Financial Times
The Irish Times
HeyUGuys
New Town Utopia

A film by Christopher Ian Smith
80 minutes

A Cult Modern production
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New Town Utopia is a film about utopian dreams and concrete realities – a feature documentary that tells the story of the British New Town of Basildon, Essex.

After World War Two, New Towns were designed as social utopias, built to create a 'new type of citizen' – with public art, homes by progressive architects and work for everyone. Basildon and its pioneer residents were invested with these post-war hopes and aspirations.

60 years on, the town has deteriorated, degenerated and desaturated. Art and culture are almost a distant memory and Basildon is often referred to as the worst town in Britain. The original plans and architecture, once thought so progressive, are now vilified in the face of a terrible reputation, struggling local economy and fragmented community.

Using art and culture as a lens – the film explores the development of the town from socialist stronghold dubbed ‘Little Moscow on the Thames’ to becoming a Tory stronghold and home of the right-wing ‘Basildon Man’. A destabilising, significant shift from community to individual over an incredibly short period of time.

An audiovisual journey through populated ruins, New Town Utopia is brought to life through the memories stories and performances of artists, musicians and poets from Basildon. Facing austerity, adversity and personal challenges these are individuals driven by their creative spirit to help their community through art, poetry, music... and puppets.

Featuring a voice over by Oscar-winning actor Jim Broadbent (Iris, Moulin Rouge, Sense Of An Ending), New Town Utopia is directed by Christopher Ian Smith (Arterial), with Margaret Matheson (Scum, Sid and Nancy, Sleep Furiously) as Executive Producer.
Reviews

100% FRESH
Rotten Tomatoes

★★★★
'Consistently fascinating, unfolds like a warning from history. Powerful material'
The Times

★★★★
'Unapologetically upbeat film in which utopianism is taken unexpectedly seriously. Absorbing and heartening'
The Guardian

★★★★
'Endlessly poignant. An ode to the unique moment when post-war Britain allowed itself to dream'
Financial Times

'Intelligent, poignant and delicately ambiguous portrait. Leaves a rich impression'
The Big Issue

★★★★★
'It’s clever and atmospheric, and the contributions from the various interviewees are thoughtful, funny, melancholy and cynical.'
Culturefly

★★★★
'Dramatic and inspirational. Sensitive portrayal'
The Upcoming

★★★★
‘A lovely and melancholy documentary feature debut from Christopher Ian Smith’
FlickFilosopher

'Quirky feature documentary. About as far from the Avengers: Infinity War as it’s possible to get'
Metro

'It has intelligence, poise and empathy’
Sight & Sound

'Moody and oddly moving'
Time Out
Director's Statement

'Basildon is complicated', so wrote Norman Scarfe in the 1968 *Shell Guide To Essex*. He was right.

In 1946, Lewis Silkin, the Minister for Town and Country Planning, delivered a lyrical and impassioned speech to parliament. In the midst of the Labour government's radical post-war policy drive, he announced a plan to build ten 'new towns' across the UK. It addressed the major issues facing the cities of Britain - including the devastating impact of WW2 bombing and atrocity living and working conditions. It would achieve this by relocating families to new, purpose-built towns. Silkin's speech expressed a desire to create 'a new type of citizen' who would develop through living in the new town 'a sense of beauty, culture and civic pride'. He evoked Thomas More's *Utopia* in the scale of his ambition.

The new towns and their early residents were invested with these post-war hopes and aspirations. Seventy years on, Basildon, of this first wave of new towns, is a challenging place that's been through difficult times. According to recent research carried out by its council, Basildon houses one quarter of the most deprived areas in Essex, the gap between rich and poor is huge - making it the 6th most unequal city in the country, and 29% of workers in Basildon earn less than the living wage. Art and culture seem to be a distant memory. Its negative reputation precedes it, having cemented a place in popular culture as a paradigm of a shit British town.

So what happened?

This was the question that provoked *New Town Utopia*, a feature documentary and passion project for me. I grew up in the town next door to Basildon (an online troll of the film called me 'the posh boy from Benfleet'). When I was young I spent a lot of time there with my mum, and it felt different to the rest of the world as I knew it. Odd sculptures floated above the pedestrianised high street. The buildings were concrete boxes that gleamed on sunny afternoons, but amplified the sombre mood of dark wet days. It also had a brilliant comic book shop.

Growing up in the 80s, a negativity surrounding Basildon seemed to swell and fester, locally something of a no-go location if you weren't from the town. At a national level names began to stick - Basildon Man, Chav, Essex Girl - labels that were sometimes ball and chain, sometimes badge of honour. Unsurprisingly these weren't coined by people from Basildon or Essex. A Sunday Telegraph article first identified 'Basildon Man', defining him as 'young, industrious, mildly brutish and culturally barren'. It was patronising, superior and fully intended to reinforce negative perceptions of successful working class people.

I returned to the town, decades later, and the fabric didn't seem all that different, a few cracks here and there. There were new developments, half the pubs were now blocks of flats. Most significantly, large swaths of the the once bustling high street had been replaced by charity shops, betting shops, payday loan lenders and empty shops - like so many high streets across the UK. This local economy has been dispersed and shunted elsewhere, to Amazon, shopping centres and out of town cinemas, restaurants, bars, pubs... the biggest supermarket in Europe on the edge of town.

Basildon has long been a political bellwether - it voted for Thatcher, Blair and then Brexit. With this in mind, I hope that the film, through its focus on one town, reveals something about the state of modern Britain. In the 70s the town began a shift from being a socialist stronghold dubbed "Little Moscow on the Thames" to a Tory stronghold within ten years. This was destabilising change, as the individual trumped community in a town built upon communitarian values, with Thatcher's 'right-to-buy policy at its heart. On top of this, the adversarial nature of British politics led to changing parties in power (nationally and locally) pulling the town in different directions, at a time when it was still growing. As Vin Harrop, a champion for the arts in Basildon, once told me 'democracy does not build new towns'...
Director's Statement

Brexit happened two thirds of the way through the heavy-lifting on New Town Utopia, and it was a considered decision not to change direction or retrofit what had come before into a new narrative about Europe. I didn’t want this project to be defined by Brexit, however by its nature will offer a perspective on the underlying influences upon the decision of 70% of voters in Basildon. A town with relatively low levels of immigrant residents.

Some of those I met were artists, poets and musicians whose creative pursuits occurred either in spite of the town, or as a reaction against it. They were individuals with imagination, talent, fight and a shared belief in the positive power of self expression. These characters included: Steve Waters (the puppeteer behind Old Man Stan, a puppet pensioner activist who gained a cult following on YouTube); folk and blues musician the ‘Bard of Basildon’ Phil Burdett; poets Ralph Dartford and Olmo Lazarus; and musicians such as Sue Paget and Rob Marlow from the ‘80s electro scene that spawned bands like Yazoo and Depeche Mode.

Their thoughts, work and memories are the narrative engine of the film of New Town Utopia. That particular line from Silkin’s speech lingered, ‘a sense of beauty, culture and civic pride’. This aesthetic utopian dream felt so alien to the mood of the town. A mood that I gauged through time spent with many Basildon people during my research. Although it’s true that many of the first generation ‘pioneers’ maintained pride about the town, what it represented, and the shelter it provided. I found that many from later generations were desperate to escape, and seemed to blame the town itself for many of their own personal ills.

Somehow, somewhere, over time, Silkin’s aesthetic and civic dream had faltered - in the film I try to understand why and how this happened, and what this means for Basildon, its people and the rest of the UK. In doing this the film touches on some key challenges facing British society, including the housing crisis, the sucker punch of globalisation and new technology on our high streets, and the continued demonisation of people from working class backgrounds.

The style of the film is intended to be at once both objective and immersive, a meditation on place that is part psychogeography and part city symphony. The cinematography is focused on the exterior spaces of the new town. The composition of the landscapes and interviews is influenced by classic architectural photography – most strongly the work of the Bernd and Hilla Becher - an objective eye interlocked the subjective ear of memories, art and ideas. I hoped to immerse the audience in the town’s textures, colours and design, to represent the journeys, sights and aesthetic experience of the town’s residents. Static and slow moving cameras at eye level, through tunnels, over bridges, across parks. The view from a car window.

Camus considered Utopia to be ‘in contradiction to reality’. So Basildon’s not Utopia, but where is?

- Christopher Ian Smith
Production team

CHRISTOPHER IAN SMITH – Producer/Director

Chris is a filmmaker and photographer based in London. In his early career he was a DJ/VJ and Producer with the audiovisual collective Addictive TV. He was involved with the production and live performance of many experimental films, audiovisual cut-ups and motion graphics. This included performances and screened work at festivals and venues across the world, including: Le Centre Pompidou, the ICA and the BFI.

Chris is now focused on developing narrative moving image work. His work spans documentary and fiction, sometimes combining the two. Regular thematic strands in his work include the interplay of the human psyche with landscape, folklore, architecture and the uncanny. Chris has created commercial films and creative work for brands including Guinness, O2, Sony PlayStation and the National Lottery. Chris’s films and photography have been screened/exhibited at film, photography and art festivals globally, and he has been selected for a number of film development and talent schemes, including Edinburgh International Film Festival Talent Lab and the FilmLondon Micro Market.

MARGARET MATHESON – Executive Producer

Margaret is an experienced Producer and Executive Producer with a distinguished history of independent filmmaking in the UK. She produced seminal British films such as Scum and Made In Britain and more recently Shell and Skin. She was also Executive Producer of Sid and Nancy and Lore. She found success and acclaim with the recent documentary film Sleep Furiously by Gideon Koppel. Most recently she was Producer of the Bafta award winning children’s television series Katie Morag.

GREG HAINES – Composer

Greg Haines is an English composer and musician who’s work exists in the unknown territories of delay-heavy, tape saturated, dub influenced studio sessions, and excursions into modern classical music and more traditional composition. Through his first three albums (recently re-issued together in 3CD or deluxe 5LP format through Denovali Records), Haines delved into long-form, slowly unravelling crescendos for strings, piano and other orchestral instrumentation, all accentuated with subtle electronics and processing to form a wall of sound where each element became indistinguishable.

Haines has toured extensively around Europe, as well as in the USA, Japan and Australia. His brand of live improvisation on his constantly evolving set-up of synthesizers, signal processors and piano led to his involvement with two live ensembles for pure improvisation: the languid, micro-seismic “Alvaret Ensemble” and the adventurous upbeat endeavors of “The Group”.

NEIL LENTHALL – Editor

London-based Editor specialising in cinematic Drama and Documentary. Graduate of the National Film and Television School’s MA Editing course.

During a decade working in post-production Neil has edited three feature films and a dozen narrative short films; documentaries shot in the UK, France, the Netherlands, and the Faroe Islands; music videos, live music and behind-the-scenes videos for artists signed to Warner Music, Universal Music and Columbia Records; and commercials, web video and corporate comms for a client list that has included the likes of Walkers Crisps, Tesco, Ford, the NHS, the Highways Agency, Tropicana, and the England 2018 World Cup bid.
Full cast + credits

Featuring
MARC BARNACLE
SHAUN BADHAM
PENNY BETTERIDGE
TERRY BIRD
STUART BROWN
PHIL BURDETT
RALPH DARTFORD
VIN HARROP
BARRY HAYES
RICHARD HAWKINS
JOE HYMAS
KATH JOYCE-BANKS
PAT JOYCE
OLMO LAZARUS
RICHARD LEE
ROB MARLOW
JOE MORGAN
VINCE O’CONNELL
SUE RYDER PAGET
MIKE PARKER
WENDY TAYLOR
STEVE WATERS
TIM WILLIAMS

Produced, Filmed and Directed by
CHRISTOPHER IAN SMITH

Executive Producers
TERRY BIRD
MARGARET MATHESON

The voice of Lewis Silkin
JIM BROADBENT

Music
GREG HAINES

Editors
NEIL LENTHALL
CHRISTOPHER IAN SMITH

Edit Assistant
NOEMIE PHILIPPSON

2nd Edit Assistant
SEBASTIANO DELL’EVA

Additional Editing
ED COLTMAN
OANA MARIN RUSU

Colourist
BRENDAN BUCKINGHAM

Sound Design
ROBIN GREEN

Dubbing Mixer
STEVE COOKMAN

Additional Cinematography
PAUL MICHAEL ANGELL
LEWIS DAVIES
FRANCIS QURESHI

Camera Operator
CARLOS CALIKA
JAY LAKER
MARCUS MARCHBANKS
MATTHEW ROWLEY

Assistant Producers
ANNEKA HASKINS
NATALYA MYKHAYLYUK

Production Assistants
ROXANNE KOSMACK
LUBNA SALAD
LEAH YVONNE REVIVO
PAUL VERNON

Researchers
WILL ALMOND
SHARON KITS
ANNA KIDEL
KENO KATSUDA
CHRISTY O’NEIL
MEGAN ROURKE
HIMANSHU SHARMA

Marketing Assistants
AMANDA SOON
DAVIDE RAMBALDI

Additional Music
The Face Of Dorian Gray
Written and Performed by ROBERT MARLOW

Additional Footage
Basildon – Our Town
Produced by WOODLANDS SCHOOL
Community
Produced by NEW TOWN FILMS

Archive
KINOLIBRARY
Personal collection STEPHEN BALDWIN
Rant n’ Rave at The Roundacre SANDRA BROWN

Personal collection RITA CLARK
Personal collection DEAN CLARKE
Personal collection DAWN DERRICK
Personal collection PAUL DODD
City 19 at The Towngate DEAN FENNER

Personal collection STEVEN HASTINGS
Personal collection DAVE HAWKINS

Jelly Pinnacle at The Roundacre MARK LANGRIDGE
Land at The Roundacre PAUL PROGRAM

Personal collection IAN ROUGH
Personal collection ROB WOOD

Artworks featured
Morning by Shaun Badham
Mosaic by GEOFFREY CLARK
Christ by T.B. HUXLEY JONES
Devourer Of Souls by ALAN JOYCE
There’s A Spectre Haunting Europe by ALAN JOYCE
Mother and Child by MAURICE LAMBERT
After The Uprising by ROBERT KOENIG
The Chessmen by WILLIAM MITCHELL
Man Aspires by AJ POOLE
The Compass Bowl by WENDY TAYLOR
Animal Fresco by WENDY TAYLOR
Armillary Sundial by WENDY TAYLOR
Why? by CLIVE WAKEFORD
Cockroach by LUKE ‘DANE’ WARBURTON

Funding Producers (through Kickstarter)
DAVE AMIS
MARK BEECHEILL
SIMON CARTER
DN&CO
TIM COLLINS
RICHARD N CRABTREE
GRAEME DAVIDSON
GEORGE GREEN
GARY HARSENT
CARSTEN HERTMANN
KEN + THELMA HIBBELER
BEN LEWIS
AMANDA LOOMES
DEBORA KNIGHTS
MIM MACMAHON
MICHAEL R POTTER
JONATHON PRESTON
RAJ RANDHAWA
NSIMON SEGARS
CHLOE SMITH
KOSALA UBAYASEKARA

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CULT MODERN Production.
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