



Scoping Stephenson: The Formative Influences

Jenny GREGORY, Prof. Dr.

The University of Western Australia, Australia
jenny.gregory@uwa.edu.au

Gordon Stephenson (1908-97) was the archetypal modernist planner. During a stellar career, he advised governments, designed projects and held university posts in Britain, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, leaving a legacy around the globe.

In the early 1990s Stephenson wrote a booklet in which he traced the trajectory of what he dubbed 'compassionate town planning' and called for a return to these ideals. However much of his work suggests that his planning approach was heavily influenced by modernism and was in fact a top-down approach demonstrating little engagement with the people on which it impacted. Was the booklet written at the end of his very long life an apologia for ideals unfulfilled?

This paper, part of a larger international study of Stephenson and his role in the global development of town planning, begins the task of critically assessing Stephenson's work. It reviews existing assessment of his work and discusses his booklet on compassionate town planning. Then, taking a biographical approach and using evidence from his autobiography and extant letters published in other works, it discusses his life up to World War II; his childhood in Liverpool, training at the Liverpool School of Architecture, travels to Europe and the United States, encounter with modernism and Le Corbusier, and his increasingly socialist leanings teaching in pre-war Britain, in search of the roots of his desire for compassion in town planning.