Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

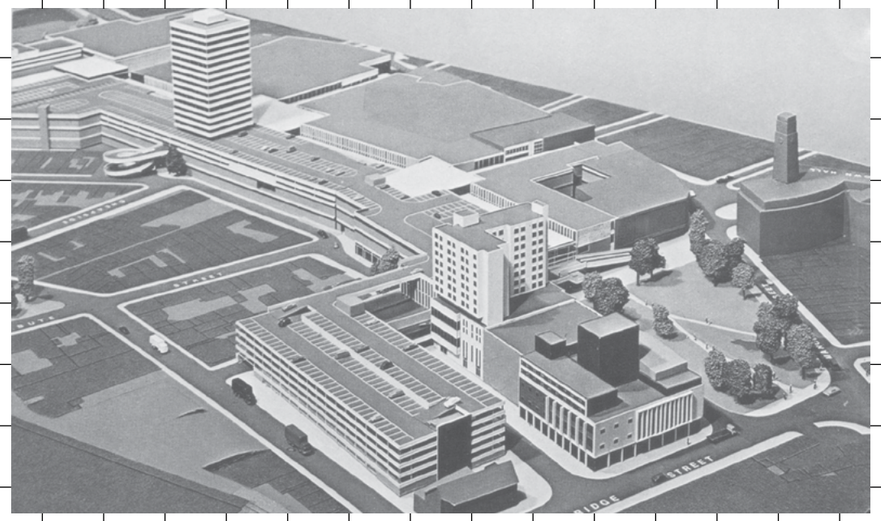
Town & city properties: From colonial rubber plantation to the world’s largest property developer

Kefford, A.; Heuvel, D. van den; Campos Uribe, A.; Dingen, S.; Sande, W. van der

Citation
Kefford, A. (2024). Town & city properties: From colonial rubber plantation to the world’s largest property developer. *Staying With Modernity?,* 119-124. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4249451

Version:	Publisher's Version
License:	Leiden University Non-exclusive license
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4249451

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Architectural model of central area redevelopment for the English town of Luton.
Town & City Properties Limited, Report and Accounts, 1971.
Image source: P&O Business Archive, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

Alistair Kefford (Leiden University)

Town & City Properties: From Colonial Rubber Plantation to the World's Largest Property Developer

INTRODUCTION

In the decades after 1945 the British real estate development sector exploded in size and began operating on a global scale. The largest real estate companies in the world were British in this era and they were responsible for planting new modernist forms—especially skyscraper office blocks and sprawling shopping malls—in cities all over the world.[1] This phenomenon was inextricable from the historical experience of empire, and the way this continued to benefit British business and to shape world economic systems in the post-1945 era. Britain's real estate firms exploited the country's worldwide commercial, cultural and geopolitical linkages to build in colonies, former colonies, and other imperially-linked spheres even as the empire was disintegrating in a formal political sense. In order to finance this transnational activity, British real estate firms partnered with the City of London's internationally-oriented financial sector. This was another imperial hangover. London's financial strength was rooted in transnational investment under the imperial world system, and its merchant banks and financial institutions were well-used to operating on a global scale. Alongside this striking global activity, the British real estate sector played a critical role domestically by partnering with local authorities to undertake large-scale urban renewal schemes in towns and cities all over the country. Through this work the real estate business was also centrally involved in the planned redevelopment of urban centres which revolved around new models of welfare statehood, automobility, and the affluent society.

This paper will approach this larger history through the story of one of the most prominent of these post-war real estate firms: Town & City Properties Limited. Town & City was at the heart of both of these dynamics—the global and the domestic—being simultaneously one of the largest property developers in the world in the 1970s and the most prolific urban renewal practitioner back in Britain. In the early 1970s Town & City was pursuing the largest development program of any property company in the world, worth £330m (this equates to roughly £3.5bn in present-day values). These developments were spread across the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, and Continental Europe, and they were predominantly modernist

1 Alistair Kefford, "The Global Rise of the British Property Development Sector, 1945–1975," *Past & Present* 264:1 (2024), 199–235.

office skyscrapers, which was the company's specialism.[2] This business therefore played a key role in the transplantation of new modernist forms to cities all over the world, and in the globalisation of urban development and real estate investment more generally. Domestically Town & City became the most prolific practitioner of large-scale public-private urban renewal schemes in Britain, with the company having completed around fifty such projects by the early 1970s and emerging as the undisputed leader in this field. Large-scale urban renewal, or comprehensive development, was at the heart of Britain's urban planning and redevelopment regime in this era, and it was carried out through partnership with real estate developers such as Town & City. Comprehensive development schemes saw urban centres overhauled and transformed with new shopping and commercial facilities, new roads and transport infrastructures, and also new social and municipal facilities. Such projects were therefore hugely consequential, reshaping cities according to the ideals of modernisation, motorisation, affluence, and welfare statehood, while introducing striking new modernist forms and environments to post-war Britain.[3]

TOWN & CITY'S IMPERIAL INHERITANCE

Having sketched out Town & City's scope and significance on both the global and domestic stage I want to return to the question of imperial inheritances and continuities, because the connection of Town & City Properties Limited with Britain's imperial past was direct and striking. The company which became known as Town & City was originally formed in 1910 as Gan Kee Rubber Estate Limited, a colonial rubber plantation in the British colony of Malaya. British imperialists and trading companies took firm control of the Malayan Peninsular in the mid-nineteenth century and began pursuing large-scale extractive and exploitative forms of wealth creation such as tin mining and rubber production. Rubber production especially was entirely an imperial creation (the rubber plant was native to South America) and it was one of the British empire's most profitable enterprises. Before the large-scale production of synthetic rubber (which began in the mid-twentieth century) natural rubber was one of the world's major commodities. For this reason rubber production in British Malaya boomed from the late-nineteenth century and made Malaya Britain's most financially lucrative colony. Rubber plantations required vast swathes of land, and commercial access to this land was guaranteed through the colonial authorities' claims to possession and insistence on the right to grant and enforce ownership rights. The Gan Kee Rubber Estate started out in 1910 by being granted 'an excellent block of land, 1,000 acres in extent, which has been selected and applied for from the government'.[4] Rubber production in the Malayan Peninsular, and the specific business activities of *Gan Kee Rubber Estate Limited*, were thus completely inseparable from empire and all its appropriations and exploitation of peoples, territory and resources.

The Gan Kee Rubber Estate operated for fourty-four years in British Malaya, until 1954 when the company was forced to extricate itself from this sphere during the violent anti-colonial struggles which the British euphemistically called 'the Malayan Emergency'. This was in reality an anti-colonial independence struggle, which involved a long guerilla war and brutal colonial reprisals and counter-insurgency measures. As premier sites of colonial economic exploitation, rubber plantations and rubber plantation owners were frequently targeted in this conflict. The Gan Kee company clearly decided its position in Malaya was untenable at this point, because the decision was taken to sell the estate and repatriate the proceeds back to metropolitan Britain. This process left the shell of a company casting around for a new business to enter. In mid-1950s London one could not fail to be confronted with one particular business that was positively booming: that was commercial real estate development, and specifically commercial office development in the capital. The amount of office floor space in central London increased by one third across the 1950s, as scores of new property companies began erecting modern (and modernist) office blocks in the City and the West End.[5] Gan Kee entered this field in 1956 by purchasing an existing property company called Midland City Properties. This purchase bought for Gan Kee a small property portfolio of around twenty 'shop and business premises', and it also brought the company into alliance with the London property professionals who were managing Midland City Properties. These figures were then brought into the management of Gan Kee. The company name was changed from Gan Kee Rubber Estate Limited to Town & City Properties Limited, and a new trajectory was set for this business.[6]

REDEVELOPING POST-1945 BRITAIN

Like many other real estate firms in this period, Town & City Properties expanded exponentially across the 1950s and 1960s as real estate boomed in Britain. The company's post-tax profits rose from £12,000 in 1958 to £3.75m in 1973. In real terms (i.e. adjusted for inflation) this profit figure of 1973 was 167 times larger than that of 1958, so this was an astonishing growth in business profitability. Town & City rapidly emerged as one of the dominant forces in multiple fields of real estate development in Britain. The company was a leader in metropolitan office development, where it owned and built numerous high-end office premises in central London, where commercial office rents were among the very highest in the world. Town & City was also active in industrial development, building and leasing factories and industrial estates in many parts of Britain. And, as indicated, the company became the undisputed leader in the field of large-scale

2 Town & City Properties Limited, *Report and Accounts* (1974), P&O Business Archive, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.
3 Alistair Kefford, *The Life and Death of the Shopping City: Public Planning and Private Redevelopment in Britain since 1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).
4 "Gan Kee Rubber Estate," *Financial Times*, 21 March 1910. See also Lynn Hollen Lees, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects: British Malaya, 1786–1941* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).
5 Peter Hall, *The World Cities* (McGraw-Hill, 1966), 33.
6 "Town & City Properties Limited," *Financial Times*, 24 October 1956.

urban renewal, which was pursued in Britain via public-private partnership arrangements between real estate firms and local urban authorities. Town & City was responsible for dozens of such schemes all over Britain, both in major cities and in many smaller, second-order towns. To give just one example, there was the Luton central area redevelopment scheme, which comprised a new road scheme, a US-style shopping mall with one hundred and twenty-five shops, two multi-storey carparks, an eleven-storey hotel, an office block, a petrol station, a public house, and local authority flats. In a sign of the new enthusiasms of the auto age there were also plans for a sixty-room motel in central Luton, although this failed to materialise. Luton's central area scheme was one of the largest redevelopments in the country, and it was built across the late-1960s and early 1970s 'in partnership with Luton Corporation' (the city authority).[7]

TOWN & CITY'S INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

Through such urban renewal schemes, through office and retail development, and through its industrial projects, Town & City Properties clearly played an outsized role in reshaping the urban spaces and places of post-war Britain. All of this took place less than twenty years after the company's conversion from colonial rubber plantation. Town & City's international activities were just as striking as its domestic program, and these again followed remarkable rapidly from the company's conversion from a colonial enterprise in the mid-1950s. In the 1960s, Town & City began operating internationally, at first by entering friendly Commonwealth markets such as Australia, where the company built shopping malls and skyscraper office blocks. Around 1970 the company became very active in neighbouring European cities, such as Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam. In the Netherlands in particular Town & City took on numerous development projects, mostly office skyscrapers but also some industrial schemes.[8] The most dramatic Dutch project was undoubtedly the Europoint office complex here in Rotterdam. These three hulking office towers were designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and were the tallest skyscrapers in the country at the time of their completion in the early 1970s. When they were sold by Town & City (to Rotterdam city authority) in the mid-1970s, this was the largest ever property transaction carried out in the Netherlands.[9] Just like in Britain therefore, Town & City played a major, transformative role in the overseas urban contexts where it operated, reshaping urban landscapes and property markets. The reason British real estate firms like Town & City were able to operate internationally was because they were backed firmly by the London financial sector, which was responsible for extending the loans, the foreign currencies, and the guarantees needed for this work. At the same time as the Rotterdam Europoint scheme, Town & City was busy building oversized modernist office blocks in Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Copenhagen, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Boston and New York. This remarkable global reach was made possible by London's long experience as an imperial financial centre, well accustomed to financing overseas commercial ventures.

CONCLUSION

Town & City's history is remarkable and revealing. Founded in 1910 as a colonial rubber plantation, the company operated as an extractive and exploitative colonial enterprise for almost half a century up to the mid-1950s. At this point, and seemingly with little trouble, the business was repurposed for metropolitan property development, and then began an astonishing ascent in both the domestic and the international spheres. Town & City's dual role as a key provider of urban renewal in post-war, welfare state Britain and an early proponent of globalized commercial real estate development is especially striking. Both of these roles were bound up with powerful dynamics of economic, social and cultural modernization in the post-war world, and they were carried out through modernist aesthetic and architectural registers which similarly spoke to ideas of progress, novelty, and societal advance. And yet the underlying capitalist structures within which Town & City thrived displayed marked continuities from an earlier age: the legal corporate entity of the business traced a direct lineage back to an exploitative imperial enterprise in colonial Malaya, while the world economic system through which Town & City operated transnationally in the 1960s and 1970s continued to be powerfully shaped by the afterlives and hangovers of empire.

7 "Luton Redevelopment," *Financial Times*, 15 December 1969.
8 Town & City Properties Limited, *Report and Accounts* (1971), P&O Business Archive.
9 Tim Verlaan & Alistair Kefford, "Building 'Holland's Tallest Office Block': The Transnational Origins and Troubled History of a Speculative Office Development in Post-War Rotterdam," *Architectural Histories* 9:1 (2021), 1–14.