CHAPTER

1

PLANNING AND THE CRITIQUE OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Americans have always been ambivalent about cities and about the life of big cities in particular. At its outset, and throughout its great period of western settlement, the country regarded itself as a garden—the garden of the world—even though its settlement was being carried forward by the railroad. And even though the onset of industrialism and the growth of the cities transformed the garden of the world into a land of machine-produced plenty, mechanical agents of change have always been seen somehow as alien presences.[1] This has been especially true for intellectuals, or at least most consistently and articulately so. From Jefferson to Emerson to Dewey—whose philosophy in a sense celebrates the pluralism of American urban life—the basic attitude toward cities can be summarized by John Dewey's statement: "Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot resolve its most urgent problem to find and identify itself."

Such general intellectual discontent has taken increasingly specific form in the writings and work of urban critics and planners who have insisted that the existing patterns of urban development lack meaning and order, and destroy community. Taken together, their work forms a critique whose adherents by now range from the academy to the mass media to government. Because of its broad and articulate base of support, this critique has strongly influenced the development of the new communities. It has helped create an

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atmosphere in which the objectives of the new communities are seen as matters of public concern. More directly, the critique has provided many of the builders with the terms they use to express what they are doing and why. Most significantly, it has provided several of them with one of the ruling motives behind their activity.

The critique of urban development is thus part of the ground out of which the new communities have grown. This chapter takes a look at its foremost features, chiefly as seen through the words of its creators.

EBENEZER HOWARD AND THE GARDEN CITY

Modern American thought about the defects of contemporary urban life and the social organizations in which these defects could be righted, begins with an Englishman. Ebenezer Howard, writing in the last decade of the nineteenth century, based his view of contemporary urban life on an analysis of the waste and disorganization which the industrial revolution had brought to Europe's major cities. Howard saw urban centers growing larger and larger and felt that this growth would intensify all the problems of the city and make life there less and less humane. In his book, Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform,[2] first published in 1898, Howard proposed that the English government establish a series of small, self-sufficient towns under public control. The population of each was to approximate 30,000. By owning the land, the town could profit from the appreciation in land value and thus finance local services. The towns would be connected by transportation systems to the country's major urban center, London, and would be designed to catch London's "over-spill." Each town would be protected from encroachment (and prevented from expanding) by a permanent greenbelt circumscribing its borders.

Howard did not conceive of the new towns he proposed as elements that in themselves would right the defects of city life. Rather he saw a symbiotic relationship between city and suburb:

> There are in reality not only, as is so constantly assumed, two alternatives—town life and country life—but a third alternative in which all the advantages of the most energetic and active town life, with all the beauty and delight of the country, may be secured in perfect combination; and the certainty of being able to live this life will be the magnet which will produce the effect for which we are all striving—the spontaneous movement of the people from our crowded cities to the bosom of our kindly mother earth, at once the source of life, of happiness, of wealth, and of power.[3]

Howard's concept of the Garden City found many adherents in the United States, one of the earliest being Patrick Geddes. In Cities in Evolution, written a decade after Howard's work, Geddes took the Garden City concept and proposed such towns as part of regional plans. The first realization of Howard's concept in England came in 1904 with the developments of Letchwork (designed by Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin) and Welwyn (Unwin). The concept as modified by Geddes did not become a reality in the United States for almost another thirty years. During this period, it was kept alive by the work of the Regional Planning Association, a New York organization formed to encourage area-wide planning. Its brilliant list of members included Lewis Mumford (who had been a student of Geddes), Stuart Chase, Catherine Bauer, Clarence Stein, and Henry Wright.

With the advent of the depression, the Federal government (as well as many private, local groups) made a concerted effort to shift people from cities to adjoining rural areas; the government established over one hundred developments, most of them intended as experiments in non-urban (in a manner of speaking, even anti-urban) living. Their prime purpose was either to attract people "back to the land" or to encourage subsistence farming.

During Roosevelt's second term, the government's Resettlement Administration began to develop three new communities on the basis of Geddes' modification of Howard. These communities were the "greenbelt" towns: Greenbelt, Maryland; Greenhills, Cincinnati; and Greendale, Milwaukee. With the exception of Stein's Radburn, they constitute the only major attempt to establish English-style garden cities in America. The towns were each to have had a population of up to 10,000 and a full range of community facilities—schools, hospitals, cultural centers, and so forth. The Resettlement Administration, and particularly its Administrator, Rexford Tugwell, saw the towns as a way to meet the challenges of suburban growth and, at the same time, provide lower-income families with new and better housing.

With the end of the depression, and the start of the war, this bold experiment in public planning came to an end. The greenbelt towns were never completed and were engulfed by subsequent urbanization. Yet even as they stand today, shadows of an unrealized hope, they remain a testimonial to Tugwell's far-reaching vision.

THE REGIONAL MESS

The urban-development critique, considered as a whole, is a recoil of horror and outrage at what is seen as urbanization run wild. The language often runs to science-fiction images of devastation and monstrous growths. A typical example comes from the California

architect, Richard Neutra, in an analysis with the dark title, Survival Through Design. Neutra asks: "Must we remain victims, strangled and suffocated by our own design which has surrounded us with man-devouring metropolises, drab small towns manifesting a lack of order devastating to the soul, blighted countrysides along railroad tracks and highways, studded with petty mere utility structures shaded by telephone poles and scented by gasoline fumes?"[4] Similarly, Lewis Mumford speaks of the failure to divide its [the metropolis'] social chromosomes and split up into new cells, each bearing some portion of the original inheritance, the city continues to grow inorganically, indeed cancerously, by a continuous breaking down of old tissues, and an overgrowth of formless tissue.[5] Probably the most specific formulation of the development critique's basic response to the contemporary situation comes from Peter Blake's book, God's Own Junkyard, written in 1964. Blake, editor of Architectural Forum, says: ". . . we are about to turn this beautiful inheritance [the American landscape] into the biggest slum on the face of the earth. 'The mess that is man-made America,' as a British magazine has called it, is a disgrace of such vast proportions that only a concerted national effort can hope to return physical America to the community of civilized nations."[6]

According to the critique, nothing escapes the brutal marks of the urbanization process, which begins in the old central cities. In the words of Senator Harrison Williams of New Jersey: "The impact of this decentralization of downtown areas is plain to see. Business wilts in the traffic congestion, property values sink, tax revenue declines, slums multiply and the need for a larger urban renewal program intensifies."[7] The great functions of the city are also seriously weakened. From another national magazine, House and Home: "Suburban sprawl negates and frustrates the purpose of cities which is to let more people live and work close together and so utilize and enjoy the maximum efficiency of community facilities and community enterprises, with easy access and cheap distribution."[8]

Not only the city suffers, but the area around it as well. Between the city and the suburb, aesthetic damage is coupled with a new kind of emotional pressure. Senator Williams again: "Frenzied traffic makes driving an obstacle race, and the greed of the subdividers disfigures the city's natural beauty."[9] There is also economic waste. From a brochure describing the situation in California in 1962, "California, Going, Going . . ." issued by California Tomorrow, a non-profit educational institution: ". . . this state's supremely attractive resources of land, air and water are being defiled by disorderly, unsightly intrusions of subdivisions, cars, roads, parking spaces, sewage, exhaust, strip development, suburbs—sloppy, sleasy, slovenly, slipshod semi-cities."[10] The waste and economic inefficiency extend even to the developments. William Whyte, one of the earliest students

of contemporary suburbia, details the point in his study, The Exploding Metropolis: "Where the new developments are scattered at random in the outlaying areas, the costs of providing services becomes excruciating. There is not only the cost of running sewers and water mains and storm drains out to Happy Acres but much more road, per family served, has to be paved and maintained. . . . Sprawl also means low volume utility operation for the amount of installation involved."[11]

But what of the developments themselves? What are they like? And how do their residents fare? The critique sees no relief here either. A best-seller on conditions in the new suburbia, John Keats' The Crack in the Picture Window, describes the life it offers in these terms: ". . . a housing development cannot be called a community, for what word implies a balanced society of men, women and children wherein work and pleasure are found and the needs of all the society's members are several. Housing developments offer no employment and as a general rule lack recreational areas, churches, schools or other cohesive influences."[12]

E. A. Gutkind, discussing suburbia in his book, The Expanding Environment, summons up all the apocalyptic horror of the urban-development critique in the following statement:

> The last vestiges of a community have disappeared. They are hardly anything else than an agglomeration of innumerable and isolated details, of human atoms, and rows of boxes, called houses, interspersed between the industries. It is a total victory of a laissez faire insensibility and recklessness over organic growth and even over organized development.[13]

HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

The urban-development critique lists many factors that have contributed to this deplorable situation—among them, rising levels of income, population growth, and the increased mobility provided by the automobile. But to this group of critics, none of these factors seems fundamental; what brought the country to its present pass was speculation and misguided, piecemeal Federal policies. The writings of the urban critique strike this note again and again. Typical references can be gleaned from Senator Williams' testimony, Arthur Gallion's The Urban Pattern, William Whyte's The Exploding Metropolis, and so on. Probably the most concise formulation of the argument appears in Peter Blake's God's Own Junkyard.

> Suburbia got that way for two simple reasons: first, because the developers who built it are, fundamentally, no different from manufacturers of any other mass produced product: they standardize the product, package it, arrange for rapid distribution and easy financing and sell it off the shelf as fast as they can. And, second, because the Federal government, through FHA and other agencies set up to cope with the serious housing shortages that arose after World War II, has imposed a bureaucratic straight jacket on the design of most new houses, on the placement of houses on individual lots, on landscaping, on street planning, and on just about everything else that gives suburbia its "wasteland" appearance.[14]

In short, the disastrous sprawl of the past twenty years is seen as the product of the merchant builder and the government bureaucrat together, each in his own way responding only to the immediate needs of the moment.

WHAT IS THE CURE?

There are any number of proposals in the different writings of the urban-development critique as to how future urbanization should proceed and the nature of goals at which it should aim. Here is a small sampling from as many authors as there are quotations. It will be clear that they are all part of one extended discussion.

> We are going to have to relate the adequate house of our future to the community in which it will stand.[15]

> . . . the metropolis should be "imageable." That is, it should be visually vivid and well structured; its component parts should be easily recognized and easily interrelated. This objective would encourage the use of intensive centers, variety, sharp gain, and a differentiated but well patterned flow system.[16]

> We could begin to establish and enforce statewide standards for the location and development of our cities to make sure that they are reasonably compact, widely separated by open space, served by suitable transportation, and balanced enough to minimize the need for long distance cross commuting, whether to jobs or to leisure time facilities.[17]

> In short, it makes eminently good economic sense for suburbia to encourage a mixture of building types, if only to reduce the cost of public schools. Quite obviously, it makes just as good economic sense to encourage the concentration of buildings on the one hand, and the open park land on the other, so as to reduce the length of roads and utilities, and the cost of policing or maintaining them.[18]

Common to all these proposals is one central idea: that future developments should be conceived in terms of wholes—that they be determined on the basis of essential physical, social, economic, and human needs. Future development, in other words, must be thoroughly planned.

To the urban-development critique the past twenty years has been a period of pernicious individualism and destructive chaos. Against these forces, the critique opposes the rational mind and its ability to plan. To the critique, it is planning—executed from a sufficiently high level of comprehensiveness—that will build Utopia.

This relentless and seemingly thorough-going critique was bound to influence men whose general interest in civic affairs was already high. For owners of large parcels of land, such as Janss and Irvine (developers of Janss/Conejo and Irvine Ranch, respectively) for inheritors of wealth accumulated through real-estate ventures, such as Robert Simon (the developer of Reston); and for some who had earned their own fortunes in a field related to real estate, as had James Rouse (the developer of Columbia)—the chance to shape a new life style in suburbia was irresistible. At the same time, such men are products of a culture which esteems those who make a profit. Thus, they would not just "create better communities," but would earn money doing it. The great aim of the community builders is to prove that the profit motive can be harnessed to meet head on the deficiencies exposed by the critique of urban development.

As the planning for new communities proceeded, however, conflicts arose between the goals of the planners and the profit motive. Most often, the conflict arose over how to deal with the planners' enemy, the automobile. In his book, The Heart of our Cities, architect Victor Gruen, whose firm drew the plans of at least six new communities, describes his concept of the properly designed metropolis:

> The low densities in the neighborhoods (50 persons per gross acre) are considerably higher than those we find in our sprawling suburban areas . . .
>
> Within each of the neighborhoods, within the community centers, the town centers, the city centers and the various nuclei of Metrocenter, there will be a pattern of

> pedestrian walks and plazas, and this pattern will extend into the green areas surrounding them, in order to connect various nuclei with each other. . . .
>
> Local vehicular roads and highways . . . related to each one of the nuclei, will be established as loop roads surrounding each nucleus and connecting up to car storage facilities located on the fringe of each nucleus in the form of underground or multiple-deck garages. In a neighborhood, for example, garages will not be attached to every residence.[19]

Gruen, like many other urban critics and planners, apparently believes either that most suburbanites do not really want to rely on automobiles or that they should be forced to adopt another style of life. But confronted with early plans for relatively high-density neighborhoods in which parking was separated from the individual dwelling, community builders consistently decided that most of their prospective customers would continue to demand low-density, detached houses with attached garages.

What underlies this conflict seems to be the planners' antipathy for the American middle class and a yearning for aristocratic taste and values: "All this [suburbia]," writes Lewis Mumford, "is a far cry from the aristocratic enjoyment of visual space that provided the late Baroque city with open squares and circles and long vistas for carriage drives down tree lined avenues."[20] The businessmen undertaking new communities may share this view, but time and again they have been forced to remind themselves and their planners that this very middle class is the market to which their projects must appeal.

Proponents of planning have come more and more to see planning as a dynamic process, which enables decision-makers to be better prepared to cope with exigencies as they arise. Too often the planning process for new communities has been the opposite. It has been an attempt to bind the community builder and the occupants of new communities to a preconceived set of notions about what suburban life ought to be. Much of this book will illustrate the difficulties which arise under such conditions.

NOTES

1. See Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) for a penetrating discussion of the pastoral ideal in America, both in the general consciousness and in American literature—and how this ideal responded to the coming of the machine.

2. The book was later slightly revised and published in a second edition with the title changed to Garden Cities of Tomorrow (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1902).

3. Ebenezer Howard, Garden Cities of Tomorrow (London: Faber and Faber, 1914), pp. 45-46.

4. Richard Neutra, Survival Through Design (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954).

5. Lewis Mumford, The City in History (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961), p. 543.

6. Peter Blake, God's Own Junkyard (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 8.

7. Senator Harrison Williams, U.S. Senate Committee on Banking and Currency, 87th Congress, 1st Session, Hearings, Housing Legislation of 1961.

8. "Land," House and Home, XVIII, 2 (August 1960), 114.

9. Ibid.

10. Samuel E. Wood and Alfred E. Heller, "California, Going, Going . . ." (Sacramento, Calif.: California Tomorrow, 1962).

11. William Whyte, The Exploding Metropolis, (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1958), p. 122.

12. John Keats, The Crack in the Picture Window (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), Introduction, p. xvi.

13. As quoted in Keats, op. cit., p. 176.

14. Blake, op. cit., p. 17.

15. Keats, op. cit., p. 184.

16. Kevin Lynch, "The Pattern of the Metropolis," Daedalus, XC, 1 Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, (Winter 1961), 94.

17. Samuel E. Wood and Alfred E. Heller, Phantom Cities of California, (Sacramento, Calif.: California Tomorrow, 1963), pp. 65-66.

18. Blake, op. cit., p. 19.

19. Victor Gruen, The Heart of Our Cities (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964), pp. 274, 277-278.

20. Mumford, op cit., p. 503.