

Housing the city dweller

D. GREGORY JONES

Before the last war, architecture was not taken seriously as an art or a science by professional people to whom literature, painting and music were an essential part of life. Still less did architecture make much of an impact on working people outside the professions. Since the war, however, the direction of people's attention towards post-war reconstruction, the impact of the 1951 Exhibition, and, unexpectedly, the direction of television towards things visual, have resulted in public concern with matters of design being more alive than it has been for decades. Public interest, stirred by years of vigorous and devoted propaganda, is demanding a high standard of design in everything from furniture to housing. The time has now come to go beyond this and to stir public interest in the most important design matter of all, in architecture writ large—in the reconstruction of our cities.

The *Manchester Guardian* of 25th January reported that "a new town-planning movement, born of impatience with the pace of dispersal from congested centres and dedicated to the comprehensive reconstruction of existing towns and cities, was launched last night at a conference in London". It is significant that the movement was launched from a conference called by a Trades Union, the Association of Building Technicians, because it is clear that the major transformation in housing and town-planning policy for which this new movement calls has no hope whatsoever of realisation unless a substantial body of public opinion, particularly in the labour movement, is mobilised behind it.

What then are the tenets of this new movement? Because the movement is only now coalescing it is impossible to be precise in every detail. The two main battlefields however seem to be quite clear. They are, firstly, that we should concentrate on housing the city dwellers within the present built-up areas rather than

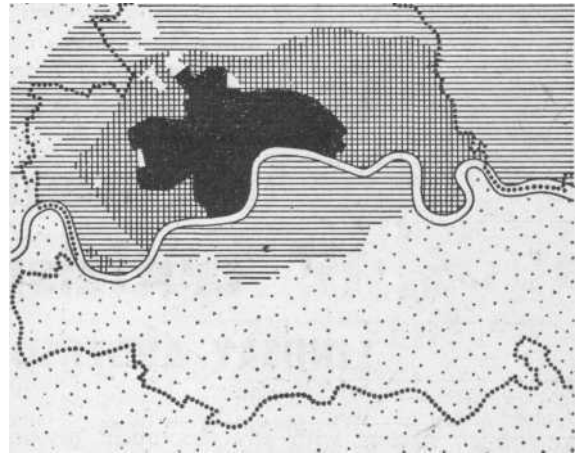
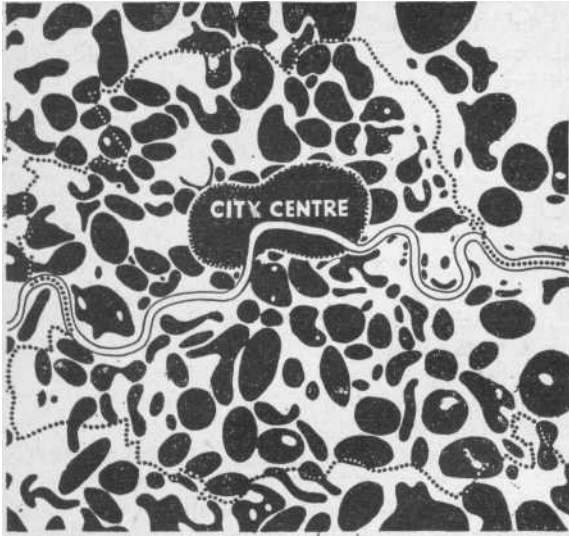
regard decentralisation to new towns or expanded towns as the solution to the problems of the cities. Secondly, that town-planning policy should aim at re-establishing the identity of the component parts of our great cities and conurbations—"towns within cities" was the slogan thrown up by the conference. This second point is associated with a proposed solution to the desperate crisis in housing caused by the "sites famine" in our cities. What in detail do these points imply, what would their implementation mean for the British people?

The very cornerstone of post-war thinking about the problem of where to build has been the conviction that not only are the centres of our cities so congested that, even if re-built, they could not house their existing population at decent standards, but also that sites for all the new housing, schools, etc. required to receive the "surplus" population from the congested areas and to satisfy general needs could not be found within the existing built-up areas. Consequently, while building has gone on to no small degree on undeveloped and bomb cleared sites, the emphasis, particularly in shaping policy for the future, has been on "exporting" population to new towns, expanding towns and to housing estates beyond the existing suburbs. The point of view put to the conference was that this emphasis was both undesirable and unnecessary. It was undesirable because, in this small island, we cannot afford the space for huge urban regions on the American model. The 1951 Census revealed staggering increases since 1931 of population in the suburban areas beyond the green belts—the population of Hertfordshire, for example had grown by 52%—while the cities themselves had remained generally static in population, or had even declined. If this process is allowed to continue it is quite possible that we shall live to see continuous suburbia from the south coast to the great industrial conurbations of the Mid-

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lands. That the emphasis on "exporting" population beyond the present built-up areas was in many cases unnecessary had been revealed in recent studies of the density of population within the existing built-up areas of the cities. Without going into technicalities, the picture that emerges is that the layouts of our cities—particularly as developed at the hands of speculators—have achieved an almost incredible inefficiency. The waste of space is such that, in many cases, it would be possible in theory, even with the generous provision of space for industry, schools, open spaces and other "non-housing users", to house existing populations within existing built-up areas at densities approximating to that of a garden suburb. We have allowed capitalism to foul

tradition of compact town building, and it is to this rather than to continental practice that we should look for lessons if we want the end product to appeal to our people. Miss Elizabeth Denby, in an important article in the recent number of the *Architectural Review* entitled "Counter Attack" analysed the actual densities of some of the most sought-after parts of Georgian and Regency London—such as Paultons Square, or Cleaver Square, Lambeth. She found that such neighbourhoods, in which each house not only had its own small garden but also enjoyed the beauty and usefulness of its common square, achieved, by compact planning, densities which to-day are taken to justify multi-storey flats. It seems that an attempt to revitalise this tradition—



The two diagrams contrast the "eggs in a basket" pattern of London's historically developed community structure with the unrelated pyramid of density zones — dense at the centre, sparse at the outskirts — which controls the number of persons housed per acre. By allowing areas of higher density centred within the communities not only could more people from congested areas be housed within the present built-up area but also, by encouraging "islands" of compact building such a policy might lead to a striking architectural expression of London's community structure. (Reproduced from 'Keystone')

our cities: are we to allow the problem of cleaning them up to be shirked, by accepting the easy solution of transferring the problem onto virgin sites in the countryside? Or do we insist on tackling the problem largely within present built-up areas, while jealously guarding what remains of our beautiful and productive countryside? In terms of cost alone the case against the export of population seems strong enough, even at the present inflated urban site values. Glasgow corporation, for example, has found that the cost of rehousing a single Glaswegian/ in a new town on virgin land (about £1,000) is closely comparable to the cost of housing him in a slum clearance scheme within the City.

What would a policy aimed at providing housing and all the amenities of modern life within present built-up areas mean in terms of our environment? It would mean that *all* new housing developments, not only those in central areas, would have to be much more compact than we are used to in suburbia—it was suggested to the conference that a minimum density of 100 persons per acre should be established for all new housing in suburban and semi-suburban areas. It would be quite wrong to assume from this that the Englishman is being asked to give up his garden: the choice is not between decentralisation into garden suburbs and concentration into tall flats, but between sprawl and compact building. England has its own extremely fruitful

needless to say in its essentials as urban design rather than in its architectural detail—combining it, perhaps, with the modern possibility of housing those who want it in tall blocks of flats, might persuade our people to accept compact towns with an enthusiasm not usually lavished on a prospect of flat dwelling.

The idea behind this slogan is both a means and an end—a means to find the desperately needed sites for new housing that at the same time gives identity and social focus to the huge areas of our cities that are covered with suburban sprawl. Present development plans emphasise the single pyramid-like structures of our cities, allowing high densities at the centres—reflecting high land costs and the "journey to work" problem—graded down to very low densities at the fringes. What is now suggested is that within this overall "pyramid of densities"—particularly in the outer areas—new or existing communities should themselves be treated in the same way, with areas of dense or tall buildings marking their centres. This should be combined with the establishment of places of employment and the elements of a social centre. To put it another way, the proposal is that, instead of attempting to move so-called surplus population from the congested central areas to completely new towns, etc. the move should be within the existing built-up areas to new "towns within cities" formed by rebuilding areas of the suburbs

at higher densities. It was particularly interesting at this conference to hear this proposal put forward from the platform with a degree of diffidence—because of the daunting political and economic problems involved in a policy which necessitated the purchase and demolition of quite recent property—and then to hear from the delegates of at least two cities already undertaking very similar policies. It was suggested that certain local authorities with very large suburban estates should take the lead by experimenting in these areas.

It is of the utmost importance that these and similar ideas should be discussed in the Labour Party and the Trades Unions—if only because the great industrial cities are, almost by definition, cities with Labour Councils. Conviction must be won that hard political struggles are worthwhile if they are to halt the decay of our cities, bring life to the suburbs and halt the spread of building over the countryside. In particular the

proposal in *Homes for the Future*, the Labour Party's policy statement on housing, that 50% of all people rehoused from our cities in the next ten years should be housed *outside* present boundaries ought to be considered with extreme critical attention before it is endorsed by the Movement. So far as the individual house is concerned the labour movement in England might consider some modification of its visions of the future, holding out not so much a picture of semi-detached houses in large gardens as of compact towns in which everyone who wants a garden—say one housewife in two—lives in a town house, while the others live in flats. There is much truth in that infuriating dictum "You like what you know". Those responsible for planning and housing policy should remember that the Englishman knows, not only suburbia but also his heritage of compact urban living in city and market town.