

The Crisis in town planning

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"The English are town birds through and through today, as the inevitable result of their complete industrialisation. Yet they don't know how to build a city, how to think of one, or how to live in one".

D. H. Lawrence wrote this over 25 years ago. Is it true? And, if true, why? These are the questions which I want to discuss in this article.

Architects are more convinced about the city, the need to build and reconstruct our cities, than many other sections of the community. This sentiment is not something which architects need to be ashamed of; it is well-based on economic and social fact.

At the centre of the life of modern Britain are its cities. Here the economic and cultural life of our society beats strongest. Though true of all modern industrial nations, this is true in a special sense in Britain. We are the most urbanised nation in the world, excepting only Holland—35 millions out of 43 millions in England and Wales live in cities or towns.

The pattern of modern Britain, its centres of population, ports, rail and road network were laid down over a hundred years ago. These have now become formidable geographical facts. They represent an accumulation of social capital, an asset as well as a liability, that cannot be lightly written off. Most of our great modern industries have long ago replaced the ramshackle workshops which gave birth to them. But our Victorian urban encampments still remain at the centre of the twentieth century conurbations. They are our dead centres.

Concentration and Congestion

Our cities, and more especially the metropolis has lately been under attack as impediments and anachronisms.

We have four metropolitan areas—London; Glasgow and Clydeside; Birmingham and the West Midlands; Manchester and south-east Lancashire. These four hold well over a million people each. Three others also identified by the Census as "conurbations" are only a little short of a million: Merseyside; and Tyne-side and West Yorkshire. So the common lament directed against the large cities, and the future of the metropolis is no mere academic question to us.

Professor Sargant Florence, in his remarkable article on *Economic Efficiency in the Metropolis* draws up a balance sheet of the economic advantages and disadvantages of metropolitan concentration, using criteria of economic efficiency.

The high cost of land—the result of urban concentration in the conditions of a free land market—presents the greatest economic disadvantages to economic

enterprise and organisation in the city. Planning, Professor Florence points out, becomes planning by land price mechanism. He raises two objections, from the economic point of view, to the pattern that results from this kind of planning. Both objections increase in proportion to the size of the city.

The first disadvantage is that the various uses profiting especially from centrality may become so numerous that the centre approaches complete congestion—a congestion which can offset the economic advantage which concentration possesses in minimising distribution costs in consequence of the short distance between manufacturer and market.

The second disadvantage is the distance of family homes from the place where the family breadwinners work.

The significance of this analysis is that neither of these disadvantages are necessarily inherent in the big city. The effect of both can be offset by planning directed in the social—economic interests of the city as a whole. To some extent the second disadvantage is an expression of the first. New housing for instance is one of the least profitable urban land uses. It tends, therefore, to be driven out of the central area and relegated to cheaper land on the fringes of the city. The social planning of land use can counteract this tendency, and enable those who must work in the city centres to live nearby.

Professor Sargant Florence concludes his analysis by saying that *some* degree of metropolitan concentration is an economic advantage, but not all the actual amounts and kinds of metropolitan concentration that exist in the world today. "The practical task is to distinguish between the two, and to cut out the disadvantageous concentrations . . . it is a question of the scientific selection of activities".

It is interesting to compare this with the words of the Barlow Report, published seventeen years ago, on the same subject:

"Concentration must be distinguished from congestion or overcrowding. Mere size of city need not be objectionable, if the city is well planned; and if planning is undertaken in the early stages of its growth there is no obvious reason why a big city should not be just as well planned as a small one. The great difficulty of preplanning existing cities is, of course, finance." (R.C. on *Distribution of the Industrial Population*, 1940).

City, Suburb, Subtopia

My point of attack in this article does not include most of the horrors itemised and castigated by the *Architectural Review* in *Outrage*: lamp standards, tree lopping, military installations, wire, forestry, municipal rusticity. *England and the Octopus* was the title of the book edited by Clough William Ellis and which

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said some years ago many of the things which the *Review* has felt it necessary — and rightly — to say again. But the conurbation octopus will be slain by a direct attack on its nerve centres—not by slicing off a tentacle. The features attacked in *Outrage* are symptoms of the disease which is most malignant at the centre, symptoms of the failure to erect fine new cities that people will not want to escape from — either by means of the motor-car, the bottle or T.V.

The critical point for attack is the metropolis, and the city. The poor old city, attacked on all sides from the Pulpit to the Sunday tabloids. How often have the sins of society been blamed on the city! In fact the city is no better and no worse than we are. It is the reflection at the highest and most complex social level of both the virtues and the vices of our social life.

Condition of the Cities

Most of the facts about the condition of our cities have been known for some time. The declared objective of two of the three most famous war-time reports and of a great deal of legislation during and immediately after the war was to put them right. So far as our cities were concerned the main objectives were re-development and decentralisation. People were to be moved from the congested areas and blitzed areas to new and expanded towns — and there was to be no more city suburban sprawl.

Yet, as Professor Myles Wright has pointed out, the great bulk of our new housing has been sited on the fringes of our existing cities and large towns, spreading the sprawl around them in a necklace of low density development. So far as the London conurbation was concerned, he calculated that while little over thirty thousand people had been decentralised to new towns, three hundred thousand *new houses* had been built in the outer suburbs.

By comparison, progress on urban renewal and re-housing within the built up areas has been much slower. Renewal of a kind has been taking place in the inner areas of our cities and because of its scattered nature its extent is not generally realised. Following the removal of building licensing, a considerable volume of office building has been taking place in our city centres — mostly on pre-war sites and within the existing pre-war street pattern. By now, with a few outstanding exceptions like the Barbican, most of the bombed sites have been built upon. The same is largely true of the blitzed housing sites in the inner areas.

Now, therefore, we are faced in the cities with a sites famine. For the millions waiting on the housing lists the chance of a new home within the city, near their present jobs, is slender — except for the few who happen to live in a house listed as a slum. Not only housing, but also proposals for new roads for the new open spaces so badly needed in the old inner areas, and for the enlarged school sites required by the Education Act, become more and more remote owing to the absence of a pool of homes to which people who would be displaced by these proposals

could go. The effect of the sites famine is cumulative, and threatens to bring new developments of many kinds to a stop, quite apart from other difficulties that face developers. Only large scale, radical urban renewal can break this deadlock.

As the results of the site famine began to show itself in their reduced housing programmes, the big urban authorities have begun seeking solutions to their housing problems outside the boundaries of their cities. Again, decentralisation is suggested as the chief answer to the housing problem.

New Towns for Old?

It might be argued that it would be better to patch up our old cities and concentrate our main effort in building more new towns and cities. Would this not be better and cheaper than the complex and difficult task of urban renewal? Coventry's City Architect, Mr. Arthur Ling has recently reminded us that Ebenezer Howard envisaged the new towns as a means of circumventing the vested property interests in London. By moving people and work into garden cities, new values would be created there at the expense of London's property values. But it has not turned out otherwise as Howard planned. Welwyn, Letchworth and the new towns are built—and London is still growing. Employment in London has increased, is increasing and shows every sign of continuing to do so; and values are higher than ever.

It is too readily assumed that decentralisation to new or expanded towns is the key which will unlock the congestion from cities and directly assist large scale urban development.

This is a fallacy. This kind of decentralisation means moving places of work as well as homes. But when a factory moves from a congested area to a new town its workers are necessarily drawn from every part of the town — not simply from the congested area in which it was formerly sited. The same applies to the other necessary workers in a new town: teachers and clerks, workers in the distributive trades, transport and building.

Overspill and Dumping

New and expanded towns can be a means of drawing off population from the city in general — but not from particular blighted areas which need complete renewal. At best it is a complex and indirect way of achieving urban renewal. Moreover to deal with the national overspill problem of two million a total of 33 more new towns of 60,000 each would have to be built — a sobering reflection.

The promise of a new home in a new or expanded town is understandable as a political gesture to the millions on the urban authorities' waiting lists. These policies are a measure of the desperation of our authorities and the failure of the central government. Why should the citizens of our great cities not have a home within their cities? New and expanded towns may well be justified, but not as an alibi for our failure to re-construct our cities.

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Some people are beginning to ask whether new towns are an organised escape from the difficult tasks of demolishing old property in the old central parts of the city where vested interests abound, to the easier job of building on virgin soil.

Even if we are to build more new towns, they should be conceived not just as dumping grounds for conurbation overspill but as part of the national policy of population redistribution, and primarily from the point of view of being regional centres for the rural areas around them. Thought of in this way, sited where they are needed, and further away from the big cities we would find they would be fewer in number and much larger in size. This would make us come to proper urban terms with their desities.

Whatever their views on the possibility of new town development I hope most people will agree at least that our great cities are *here*, that they will probably be here for the foreseeable future, and that therefore they need renewing. How should this be done?

Miss Sylvia Crowe, in her excellent book *Tomorrow's Landscape* has identified, analysed, and classified our different types of contemporary landscape: the wild open country, the rural farmlands, the townsman's country (which includes suburbia), and the town itself. The *Architectural Review* in *Counter Attack*, distinguishes between the town and the metropolis. Britain, in the mid-twentieth century, can support these five main types of environment. Each has its own character, which must be recognised, respected, and sharpened by new building and development. Where new development is too large in scale for one type of environment, we must face the fact and design for the different type.

I am sure this is the right strategy.

Big Cities—Small Towns

Applying it to the problem of city reconstruction and town building it means drawing a distinction between big city and small town life. Both forms of living have their own human quality—if each is to be retained, their differences must be understood and developed. The great objection to universal suburbia is not only that it is creeping everywhere but that it obliterates the distinction between these environments, it frustrates the physical expression of their different character, and while claiming to give every man and woman what they want, it in fact denies to them the choice they could have. The aim of planning, physical, social and economic, should be to make the good life possible in all these types of environment. A choice between a city or a village slum is no choice.

But planning's aim should also¹ be to make it possible for everyone to choose the kind of place they want to live and work in—or just enjoy—at any moment of their lives. Very few people today, for example, want to or expect to live in the same dwelling, on the same spot, all their lives, or to spend every day of every year in the same environment. It should be the social aim of planning and housing policy to provide, within the community, a choice in type of home to which people can move. This movement

means, incidentally, a surplus of homes over families, and variety in housing types in given areas, all at rents which allow people to move into the house or flat they need. We are far from possessing any of these things at the moment and recently have been moving further away from the last one.

In contemporary Britain, planning inspired by respect for human needs means respect for the individuality of places. But needs change and places must change too — above all in the big city. The new city has a scale of its own. The new city cannot emerge unless rebuilding is planned in large units large enough to allow it to do so. This old truth was written into the conclusion on housing of the 1955 Congress of the International Union of Architects which resolved that "Within existing towns the renewal of housing must be conceived in entire neighbourhoods and not in patches or small isolated blocks."

The Monotony of Muddle

Two things, I suggest, have frustrated the emergence of the new city as a coherent conception. The failure to understand urban renewal as a continuing process and the failure to understand the scale on which this process needs today to take place in our big cities.

What sort of urban renewal takes place today? Leases fall in; Mr. Bloor sees a chance and moves in; a great private enterprise seeks a site on which to re-invest its accumulated capital and express its prestige; following up in the rear a housing committee clutches desperately on one of the few remaining straw-sized sites. The use conforms, more or less, with a very general over-all plan, and, with some slight modifications, the planning authority approves it. And so it goes on. While some of this development falls into places where radical renewal is not necessary or is not prejudiced, so large is the volume of planning applications that a great deal does not. These fragments of piece-meal are frustrating the radical re-development of a much larger area, not just now but for the economic life of the building, mortgaging the future, postponing renewal beyond the lives of all now living.

One cannot avoid the impression that at present we are frightened of the new scale of the city. This fear, masquerading as "the avoidance of monotony" is false. The real danger is muddle — than which nothing is more monotonous. The new city scale is the direct expression — not of ideas of architectural grandeur — but of new social demands. Contemporary social and technical requirements mean larger office buildings (for the same number of occupants), and, if natural daylight is to replace light borrowed from courtyards, larger sites to accommodate them. The best possibilities of new housing types and imaginative housing layout can only be achieved on larger sites. Modern educational standards call for larger school buildings and sites. The larger city block must be the unit of planning of the road system, if traffic is to be kept moving and pedestrians alive. The scale of the mid-twentieth century city must therefore be larger because the units which compose it are larger. Unless the present small-scale patchwork city pattern is replaced by

a larger one in one operation, this necessary change of scale of the city and the attendant sorting out of the small pieces of different uses, into a larger logical pattern cannot take place. Piecemeal slum clearance in the midst of continuing blight and decay will soon defeat its object. Densities which appear oppressive on small sites can look reasonable on large ones.

These are only some of the benefits to be obtained from concentrating re-development in large areas instead of dissipating it over small ones.

Patronage for the Planners?

Who is to sponsor these large operations in urban renewal—these segments of the new city?

Sir William Holford proposed the answer eighteen months ago with his proposals for the great urban estate. This, he suggested, should be the mechanism for realising large scale city re-development, and to this end its owner should become a new kind of client, combining in one body the functions of ground landlord, planner, and promoter of urban estate development. The real reason for Britain's shortcomings in central area reconstruction and town design generally since the war, he argued, has been the failure of patronage on a sufficiently large scale. Town design needs a landlord who must own all the land in the redevelopment area. The area must be large enough to permit radical re-development covering every important aspect of physical reconstruction, from, for example, the design of the road system to the siting of tall buildings. Instead there has been short-term real estate speculation, the bane of planned urban renewal. What explains our dismal record in city construction and design compared with our achievements in the design of buildings, or with the achievements of other European nations, no more prosperous than our own? Holford suggests that it is because above the level of the single building and the housing estate we have been content to rely, in our individualistic way, on the negative rather than the positive aspects of our administrative controls. Town design on the scale of the twentieth century city is literally a "territorial campaign" and has to be organised as such in a great combined operation. This task is one for which the purely regulatory and permissive functions of present town planning legislation are quite inadequate; "The authorities have prevented the worst . . . but they have not secured the best". The procedures of development control are, by their nature unfitted to the task of the active promotion of radical and comprehensive city reconstruction.

The Urban Trust

From this followed Holford's proposal for a Trust to take over the promotion functions of such bodies as the L.C.C. and probably appointed by it. This Trust would approve a comprehensive brief for the redevelopment of obsolete areas of the city. It would be landlord, coordinator and principal client in one. On such a basis:

"Instead of breaking down the job still further, as

we tend to do at the moment, the Trust would be a unifying agent, knitting together its purposes, its interests and its executed designs."

Of course any proposal for radical redevelopment must have the full support of the local authorities. The snag is that they were not designed to undertake the essentially positive task of urban development. A city is not just a collection of housing estates and schools, however contemporary they look. When the authorities see their task as not just one of running separate programmes of housing and schools, but of promoting a whole new piece of a city, they will probably find it necessary to change their committee and departmental structure — and, as Sir William suggested rescue positive planning by separating it from planning by controls. In places where the local authorities were too weak, technically and financially, to undertake urban redevelopment by themselves, the urban trust, firmly based on the authorities could undertake the job. Such trusts, like the Garden City companies, the National Trust and the New Town Corporations, would be public bodies. At least within the areas it controlled the trust would put an end to the present tragi-comic situation described by Sir William as "an indecisive contest between various forms of private and semi-private enterprise, according to the rules laid down in the planning Act of 1947, with the planning authority acting as referee."

Three Surgical Operations

There are three kinds of areas in our cities which need radical re-development on the scale suggested — and three main kinds of surgical operation appropriate to them. They lie in the heart of the city — those portions that need replacing; in the blighted inner wards; and in the suburbs "half dead and half alive" — which never had a heart at all.

In the heart of the city — areas are small but of great civic importance — St. Paul's precinct; Picadilly Circus and the centre of Coventry.

Further out the wide areas of blighted housing. The central slum wards that surround Birmingham; 700 acres of the central wards of Liverpool where nearly half the houses need immediate replacement and most are obsolete. All our big cities have problems of this magnitude in these areas. Redeveloped to modern planning standards, with their new schools and open spaces they cannot absorb their present numbers.

Two million people has been the estimated figure of this national overspill problem, of population which has to find a home outside the blighted centres; some half a million homes. Before we accept that this 2 million overspill must go beyond the green belts, I think we should examine some of the low density suburban areas very carefully to see whether we should not build at higher densities there.

New Suburbs for New Cities

I have made the point earlier in the article that the export of people and jobs outside the cities will only very indirectly help the operation of redevelop-

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ment of a particular inner slum area. If on the other hand we were able to provide more homes in the suburbs while keeping the green belts, families displaced from a specific redevelopment area could be offered homes there, within their own cities, in many cases without having to change their jobs as they must do when uprooted to a new or expanded town.

Reference at this point should be made to the Greater Stockholm plan and the principles which the Swedes have adopted in planning the structure, renewal and growth of their capital. Stockholm is becoming a regional metropolis and is to this end building a series of suburbs of a new type, planned as sections of the regional metropolis. The latest of these to be completed (and within five years incidentally) is Vällingby. It is 25 minutes by rail from central Stockholm. Its centre is on top of the railway. Around it and within a 500 yard radius are high density flats, and around them and within a 900 yard radius are terrace houses and somewhat lower density development. It is a suburb with a real heart. At the core of which is planned as a pedestrian precinct with ample car parking is an excellent shopping centre, offices, restaurants, a library, a theatre, cinema, assembly hall, medical and social service buildings, a youth centre and some light industry. This centre has a double function, being both the core of the new suburban town of 20,000 people but also the centre for an adjoining group of suburbs old as well as new, with a population of some 80,000 people. Already half the new working population living in the suburb also work there and more offices are being moved out to it from the centre of Stockholm.

It is not therefore just a housing estate. Neither, like our new towns, just beyond the green belt but with a good rail connection to the city, does it claim to be a wholly self contained community. It is a new piece of the big city. Its town centre offers not only work and commercial opportunities but the shopping, entertainment and social life of a real urban community. Its organic connection with the city is expressed in the siting of the centre with the tube station in its architectural centre-piece. The big city conceived in this way, can take on a coherent form and develop progressively as an organic whole, combining the richness of the city centre with the new life in the revitalised suburb.

Has this any relevance to our problem — the one of dealing with the 2 million overspill from the worn out inner wards? Are there any possible sites for this new concept of the "living suburb" within the green belts of our cities? If we take an expedition along our suburban train lines and see where the stations within 15 to 35 minutes stopping distance from the terminus are sited, we find I suggest, three main kinds of areas, or mixtures of them. The "twilight" areas of the old Victorian suburbs with their decaying mansions and large leafy gardens, derelict land (particularly in the Black Country) and twentieth century low density suburbia.

The land needs of the central area of this new kind

of suburb — even with other uses than housing — are not large — if they are planned as they should be as high density communities for the pedestrian. The sites for these centres are there for the looking. The operation of buying and building will, I suggest, be politically just as feasible and no more painful and socially and architecturally it would be much more rewarding than building more new towns of 60,000 beyond the green belt.

I do not want to rule out new towns. But I do suggest reversing the priorities. First let us see how much of our overspill can, and on broad planning grounds should, be found homes within the green belt, then we can see the extent to which new towns may still prove necessary. The answer may well be that we should be doing both operations, building living suburbs and new towns.

The fact that these ideas have not been put forward until so recently suggests that Ebenezer Howard's ghost still haunts British planning thought on these questions. It would be foolish to deny the value and achievements of the garden city movement in Britain — but I think the time has come to lay the ghost of Ebenezer.

Back Room and Market Place

How can we bring about a state of affairs in which urban renewal becomes a process to be forwarded not just an activity to be controlled and town building a creative job, the central architectural and planning objective of the next ten years? Architects and other professional specialists have two roles to play in this drama. One in the back room and the other in the market place.

For the first we need to do a great deal more work on discovering the architectural forms of the new city and to subject preconceptions of layout and civic design to the wider discipline of expressing the new city scale in human terms. But architects alone will not produce the new city. All professions and specialists have to re-appraise their own subjects from the point of view of the new unsolved problems of the big city, and then to find ways of working together on the basis of the most advanced trends in their own subjects. A more subtle understanding of the relationship of particular specialist skills to the problems of the city as a whole can provide the basis for new forms of co-operation between the Professions.

A certain limited amount of this basic study and research is going on — mostly based on London, Liverpool and Birmingham universities; Oxford and Cambridge, not sited in conurbations, do not seem so interested. The Ministry (which has significantly dropped Planning from its title), seems no longer to regard this as its job. Specialists are becoming more specialised, but hardly anyone is specialising in the problems of the big city. The cities present one of our more important and complex technical problems; the claim of city reconstruction in technological education should be staked.

It is no use architects waiting for the "planners" (that convenient abstraction) or an all-wise govern-

ment to present them with large sites of old cities to redevelop. It will not happen like that. The case for radical city reconstruction has to *bt* presented, argued and exhibited to the public, to politicians and to the press.

With great reluctance, born of some experience of voluntary organisations, I have come to the conclusion that another body, society, institute or association is probably needed — dedicated solely to the radical reconstruction of Britain's cities. Something which combines the authority and character of the British Association for the Advancement of Science with the financial resources and campaigning zeal of the British roads federation.

The hold of town planning on public opinion at the moment is precarious. Crichton Down and Ground Nuts have left their mark on more handy targets than the proper ones. The authority of town planning in the eyes of the public needs to be reasserted and the proper role of the architects in the city planning team established.

I started this paper with a quotation from Lawrence.

I will now complete it.

"The English", Lawrence said, "don't know how to build a city, how to think of one and how to live in one" and he continued:

"And this is because we have frustrated that instinct of community which would make us unite in pride and dignity in the bigger gesture of the citizen, not the cottager. The great city means beauty, dignity, and a certain splendour. This is the side of the Englishman that has been thwarted and shockingly betrayed."

Lawrence is right. We must end this frustration. Our centres are not dead. Within them life is struggling to express itself. We must cast off their outworn shell and find new forms of architectural expression to give shape and concrete existence to this new life. We live and die with our cities; if they are ill, so are we. The great challenge to contemporary architecture and planning. The spark point of the nation, they are the centres of our economic life, a measure of our culture, the test of our ability to govern.