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## NOTES & TOPICS

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### The Antiseptic City

THE Royal Institute of British Architects, whom God preserve, has a library. In it there is a subject index of recent buildings and projects called, with unconscious truth, the Grey Books. And in the Grey Books there are about one hundred and fifty entries under "town planning," showing redevelopment schemes all over the country by architects, engineers, and surveyors. They are nearly all devoted to city arrangement by use-zoning, site arrangement by blocks-in-landscape (all too often blocks-in-asphalt), and room arrangement by predictions of family-size and the needs of the statistically-average family in the statistically-average flat. In other words they have exactly the same kind of sterility that bedevilled the plans examined by William H. Whyte ["The Eviscerated City," ENCOUNTER, September 1958] when he came to find out what makes the American city a good or bad place to be in.

This in fact is a world-wide problem, except that the rest of the world has not realised it yet. Rotterdam, Roehampton, the Moscow suburbs, the *Hansaviertel* at Berlin, all share a fundamental lifelessness which makes the surface differences of architectural style seem unimportant and often a bit ludicrous. (Architectural style has never been more surface than at the moment, whatever the idealists may want to think; and the fault is not in the ideas of the modern movement, but in its practitioners.) Western Europe, with so many magnificent cities to draw on as pattern books, ought to have been able to see what is wrong with this brave new world and why: instead it has been left to a group of American non-architects to get to the roots of the problem, and that in an architectural climate where to challenge bigger and better development is regarded as some sort of subversive activity. Professional architectural opinion in America was apparently deeply shocked by Whyte's *Fortune* series: some obstreperous layman was rocking the goddam boat.

To extend this metaphor (now that I am stuck with it), what was rocking the boat was the sea itself, which has remained calm and uncomplaining for far too long: the sea of ordinary people in all their idiosyncrasy and variety of temperament, who should be the cause and

object of every architectural effect. In London, they are beginning to experience a few examples of this new city pattern on the ground—not as seen from above the architectural model, or inside the aircraft cockpit.\* The result is odd: disjointed, at the same time over-formal and formless, lacking any sense of imaginative pattern, chopped-up, monotonous, inhuman yet overcrowded—and this in a city whose outstanding virtue is in its contrasts and sudden incongruities and irrepressible vitality: the Billingsgate porter among the bowler hats, the Wren church and churchyard among the towering office blocks...

It is not that the people in these schemes are unhappy: no doubt they provide warm and weatherproof cells. It is just that the anonymity and needless formality have taken away any positive feeling of identification with the environment, any positive chance for individual expression—in some schemes even the curtains are controlled—which is so strong in the average Cockney terrace street with its freedom to be tidy or untidy, its corner shops and street stalls, its humane scale and its feeling of being part of a continuous a-formal pattern, starting in one recognisable place and ending in another. If this is nostalgia, it is nostalgia for the fundamental patterns of a lot of humans living together as individuals, not as a herd; and I am proud of it.

Abuse is an easy job. I should like rather to suggest five general qualities which might be applied to city redevelopment without merely producing a different brand of doctrinaire strait-jacket.

First, (and most important of all) is every modern architect's shibboleth in principle and what so few are prepared to accept in practice: that buildings ought to fit the people who will use them. Not an "average person" but the actual people Mr. A. and Mrs. B. and Miss C. who are going to move in, seen as individuals with individual needs. If the result of this is not four or five "dwelling types" but forty or fifty individual dwellings, so much the better—the variety that architects try to infuse so feverishly into their buildings by ornamental surface patterns would start to come naturally, from the core of the architectural problem: the functional demands. There should be no build-

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\* Everything looks fine from the pilot's seat. The most sterile of formal schemes looks superb from a thousand feet on a sunny morning, and so does a borough engineer's Versailles of semi-detached houses. This is significant—neither has been designed at ground level. But, alas, we are not birds, and neither is architecture just an exercise in solid geometry.

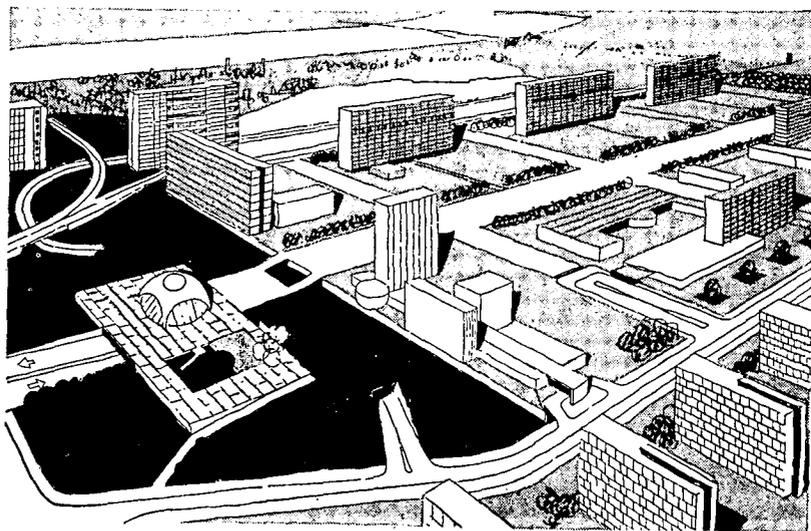
ing for a mean, but simultaneous building for every kind of extreme; and everybody is extreme in one way or other. On a larger scale the city should be a place for everyone—tarts as well as good girls, spivs as well as model husbands and honest men. The city is the place of infinite choice, and what more important choice than that between good and evil or convention and freedom.

This is not to praise Naples or Port Said, where the choice is no choice and men choose evil because endemic misery and squalor may force them to. But there are now very few parts of any British city where this is true: the Gorbals and Salford, Notting Dale and parts of Liverpool and Leeds, but not many more. You can no more separate good and evil to create a clean, rational, social-minded city than you can separate the poles of a magnet.

Second, use-zoning is a disaster for the vitality of a city, which makes its impact from the multiplicity of things all thrown together. (London, again, is first-rate by accident: Covent Garden Opera and Covent Garden Market, Southwark Cathedral jammed next to the Southwark warehouses. Public health apart—and obviously, nobody wants to live next to a tannery or a sewage works—an “industrial area,” a “neighbourhood unit,” a “cultural centre,” are fragments cut out of life and sewn up in anti-septic bags, like having a street full of cafés which only sell fish and chips, or a borough which is nothing but pubs next to a borough with none. Like things will naturally gravitate together—Hatton Garden, Whitehall, Bond Street jewellers and Charing Cross Road bookshops; but it is an organic accretion from functional and economic reasons, not an applied and artificial external direction. In this extreme form, non-zoning only really applies to cities, *i.e.*, to places whose essence is multiplicity of choice. In Piccadilly Circus you ought to be able to feel, as you can at the moment, that within a mile’s radius you can do everything or anything, legal or illegal.

The next two things are visual points and

should be taken for granted by town planners and architects. (They should be part of the first-year syllabus of any professional training; I doubt if they are.) The eye is a moving object set in a moving object; every sensation it gets is a continuous one, and static space only makes sense when the body and the eye have to stop in any case for an external reason—the central square, the church interior. Hence there must be some continuous change for the eye to hook on to: separate staccato impressions, however grand, merely cast it (and the body around it) adrift. This is the one overwhelming virtue of the continuous corridor street; and it is the overwhelming drawback of any arrangement of



isolated blocks, however well-designed. The space between the blocks can be made continuous and pleasant with planting, but you then have a landscape park with buildings (*i.e.*, a suburb) and not a city. Making this landscape “urban” with a few tricks like cobblestones doesn’t help much.

The eye takes in a straight vista all at once but cannot see round corners. In other words, any kind of purely rectangular layout does the same thing as staccato blocks do: it removes the continuity. Everything is seen all at once, and does not change at all on walking down the street. There is no build-up or progression, no chance of heightening the emotional effect of the city by surprise or contrast or holding back. Inevitably it defeats its own ends. The firm straight axis is far more effective when it is only used for important occasions and is met suddenly, and unexpectedly, coming from a tangle of angular and curved asymmetric streets

and spaces. Equally, symmetry is a good servant but a bad master: it is the perfect aid to express the special case, the occasional formal need. But life itself, the everyday pattern, is sprawling, asymmetrical, unplanned.

Finally—and this is the one thing that nobody seems prepared to understand—in any sort of planning there can be no fixed rules, and in city redevelopment least of all. A big pedestrian precinct which would be essential to one centre might kill the life of another. Each place is different and may need different treatment; even cities as close together as Liverpool and Manchester have completely different sites, functional needs, temperament, and even climate. And, of course, none of the foregoing four points is a rigid rule either. If buildings-in-landscape is folly for nine city centres it may be just right for part of a tenth. The grid-iron has stunted the pattern of ninety-nine cities and

made the hundredth—San Francisco—into a masterpiece. In nine words: look at people, look at places, think for yourselves. . . .

That is my lot. It is an angry lot, and it is not likely to be a well-received lot. But unless it (or some less bad-tempered equivalent) is heeded, we will rapidly build ourselves an inhumane, cliché-ridden, and antiseptic neighbourhood.

Ian Nairn

### “Pauvre Angletterre”

*Fifty Royal College of Art students paraded outside two new buildings in Knightsbridge yesterday crying: “PULL THEM DOWN!” The buildings are Caltex House, costing just under one million pounds and not yet completed, and Agriculture House, which cost over £500,000 and was opened two years ago.*

*The students, who have formed an Anti-Ugly Action Society, marched through Knightsbridge carrying banners and placards. It was the first of several planned operations. Their aim is better buildings.*

*The banners proclaimed: “UGLY BUILDINGS ARE A SIN!” “MUST BAD BUILDINGS SPEAK FOR BRITAIN?” and “LOOK AROUND YOU!” The students marched from Hyde Park Corner to Knightsbridge accompanied by a drummer and a bugler. . . .*

*The students objected to Caltex House as “chaotic.” There was no concerted scheme for the shops on the ground floor and the statue of three horses towering above was more suited to an Italian railway station.*

*In front of the Bowater building the procession paused for three hearty cheers: “WE APPROVE OF THAT!”*

*Outside Agriculture House the students shouted: “Outrageous!” Said Mr. Kullman: “This represents Stalinism in building. Stalin would have liked it. There is a complete misuse of classic ornament.”*

*After the students had dispersed, passers-by were still studying slogans chalked on the pavement. One read: “PAUVRE ANGLETERRE,” spelt with two “t’s.” Possibly preoccupation with modern architecture entails some neglect of modern languages.*

DAILY TELEGRAPH, 11 DECEMBER

## The Historian’s Risk

THE moral of Max Beloff’s comparison between the controversy over the rôle of the gentry in Stuart England and the controversy over the adoption of the American Constitution seems to me to be soundly drawn; and it is the Editors’ invitation, not a desire to dissent, which leads me to make a few observations that may both expand and amend Mr. Beloff’s remarks about Charles Beard (ENCOUNTER, December 1958).

If the controversy over the gentry has grown heated at times, it is no more so than that inspired by Beard’s book, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. Witness, for instance, the lively anger shown by Professor Brown, in 1956, against a book written by Beard in 1913—a book whose argument Beard himself in some considerable measure gave up thirteen years before Professor Brown attacked it. It may help the layman to understand the intensity of the argument, if not the substance of the issues, to bear in mind that in the Beard controversy two different kinds of historians’ temperaments are at war. Some historians approach their work as though they were engaged in the final death-grapple with error, as though every statement and every judgment they make were to be the last on the subject, as though mankind would never have a chance to modify or controvert their views. For those who work in the shadow of this sober and highly responsible but extremely rigid code, to err is not forgivable because it happens to be human; to criticise is to wield a lethal weapon; and one suspects that they are inwardly as demanding on themselves as they are outwardly on others.

Charles Beard seems to have had little understanding of historians of this breed, and has been still less understood by them in return. He was the sort of historian who is half a publicist, who attempts above all to relate his