Preface

We think of the town as a tissue of buildings which grows more or less unpredictably and is traversed by roads, pierced by squares, or else as a mesh of roadways fringed by buildings at the outskirts and webbed by them at the centre. Although we regard them as natural phenomena, governed by an independent, uncontrollable and sometimes unpredictable law of growth or expansion, like that of natural organisms, the truth is that towns do not grow by interior and inscrutable instincts. They are built, piece-meal by individual inhabitants, in larger tracts by speculators or authority. Now and then, particularly when a new town is founded, the authorities. whether local or national, on the advice of their experts treat the public to a display of embarrassment. It appears that civic authorities, or even the planners themselves, are not able to think of the new town as a totality, as a pattern which might carry other meanings that the commonplaces of zoning (industry, habitat, leisure, etc.) or circulation. To consider the town or city a symbolic pattern, as the ancients did, seems utterly alien and pointless. Nowadays if we think of anything as 'symbolic' it is practically always an object or action which can be taken at a single view.

The conceptual poverty of our city discourse is exposed even when we look at the recent past. In the nineteenth century the criteria for establishing its terminology were perhaps still more directly 'positive' than they are now. The distinction between town or city would be made, for instance, in terms of the paving of streets.

Going further back, however, the tone of the discourse changes, as might have been expected. Charles Daviler, a French seventeenth-century theorist, defines a town in his dictionary of architectural terms as 'an ordering of blocks and quarters disposed with symmetry and decorum, of streets and public squares opening in straight lines with a fine and healthy orientation and adequate slopes for the draining of water. . . .'[1] But his description stands at the end of a tradition. 'The city', proposes a recent writer, 'is first of all a physical reality: a more or less sizeable group of buildings, of habitations and public buildings. . . . The city begins only when paths are transformed into roads. . . .'[2] He follows his nineteenth-century predecessors. This definition is a long way from Nicias's rousing words to the Athenian soldiers on the beach at Syracuse: 'You are yourselves the town, wherever you choose to settle . . . it is men that make the city, not the walls and ships without them. . . .'[3]

Traffic in cities has today become so thick and clotted that it is hardly surprising to find this concentration on the road pattern among our contemporaries. Traffic engineering is regarded as having superseded town planning; the street pattern, the railway or underground, are superimposed on each other, and together become that aspect of the city which has the greatest notional and conceptual validity. As traffic congestion and the attendant problems mount, so traffic surgery assumes

an increasing importance in the public mind. Nor is this the only aspect of city planning which has turned into a craft of keeping one step only behind current development. Economists have for nearly two hundred years encouraged us to think that the rate of growth of urban population is to be equated with the growth of the gross national product (which they seem to consider good in itself, however it affects the individual). In spite, therefore, of the complaints about crises in traffic or about the shortage of city space, complaints which planners utter ritually whenever these problems are under discussion, when a town fails to expand at an even rate (as has been the case of the Rhine Randstadt), the same planners confess themselves dismayed by such a symptom of economic crisis.

It is commonly assumed, not only by planners, but by public authorities and even by the general public, that future expansion will go on at the present rate, forecasting the future by simple statistical inference. The possibility of new developments is elided from the argument by silence. The conceptual framework within which planners work has been designed to evade the issue of imposing any order of an extra-economic nature on the city. Fear of restriction often appears in the form of a fear of cramping an autonomous growth. That is why town planners, when talking about the way towns live and grow, invoke images drawn from nature when they consider town plans: a tree, a leaf, a piece of skin tissue, a hand and so on, with excursions into pathology when pointing to crises. But the town is not really like a natural phenomenon. It is an artefact—an artefact of a curious kind, compounded of willed and random elements, imperfectly controlled. If it is related to physiology at all, it is more like a dream than anything else.

Although the last half century has accustomed us to regard dreams as objects susceptible of serious, even scientific, study, yet the suggestion of fantasy which the word implies is regarded as offensive in the context of urban planning. This is partly because it is a matter where capital investment is huge, and partly because the well-being of masses, a well-being equated with physical amenity, is at stake.

Here again we are up against the poverty of much urbanistic discourse. The way in which space is occupied is much studied, but exclusively in physical terms of occupation and amenity. The psychological space, the cultural, the juridical, the religious, are not treated as aspects of the ecological space with whose economy the urbanist is concerned. His attention is focused on the more immediate physical problems, the resolution of which seems most urgent. But the solutions proposed, because of their physical presence, impinge on the symbolic world of the citizens; and often the arbitrary forms thrown up by harassed planners and architects are evolved on an irrational residue, motivated by unstated spiritual as well as aesthetic prejudice whose very irrationality contributes further to the instability of the community, and may set up a pattern of interaction between the community and its outward shell which will be disastrous for both.

Such procedures have been criticized by a number of sociologists.[4]

It seems to me that they are right: that some consideration must be given to the model, to the conceptual prototype of the town which its inhabitants construct mentally, and which is often exemplified in their homes. So often the home is felt to be a miniature of the city: not as it is, but as we want it. Patterns of behaviour, even of movement may sometimes be explained as being attempts to reconcile such a conceptual model with the actual, with the physical structure of the city, of which the inhabitants may be aware only in the form of diagrams—as of underground trains or bus routes.

The conceptual model I spoke of is rarely derived from such diagrams. More commonly it is related to views we hold about the space and the time we inhabit. And it is intended to anchor our views to a specific place: a particular home, a particular town.

The very statement of the problem suggests that there is no immediate solution to hand. I therefore propose to examine a closed (because past) situation, which is apparently familiar, and yet full of implications for anyone thinking about the way in which we take possession of our homes. The rectilineal patterns of the Roman towns, which survive in the street patterns and even the country lanes of old imperial lands, from Scotland to Sudan, are often thought to be the by-product of a utilitarian surveying technique. This is not how the Romans themselves saw it: the city was organized according to divine laws. The home was governed by the father of the family as the city was by the magistrates; and the paterfamilias performed in his home the complex rituals of the state religion which the colleges of priests performed for the state. The analogy between city and home, and city and land, was familiar to the Romans as it probably was to the Etruscans before them.

Before the Roman cities assumed the gridiron pattern familiar to us now, the idea of a regular city plan had to be formed in their minds. The rectilineal city was not something at which they arrived by hit-or-miss experimentation, and explained afterwards. On the contrary, it seems to me that such a device would have to have arisen from just such a model as I have mentioned. Its origins are therefore primarily interesting to me because they show the elaborate geometrical and topological structure of the Roman town growing out of and growing round a system of custom and belief which made it a perfect vehicle for a culture and for a way of life.

Over the millennium of Roman imperial rise and decline, the city underwent many changes, interpretations became increasingly elaborate and even conflicting, the rites whose meaning was sometimes forgotten were re-interpreted anachronistically. I will not be concerned with Roman and Etruscan history, except incidentally, as they bear on the development of the model and its transformation in time, which is much slower, much more gradual (as is always the case of ritualized art, ritualized procedure) than the changes in political and sometimes also religious ideas. I have chosen to deal primarily with Roman towns because theirs was an assertively urban civilization, entirely different from the one which we inhabit, and yet very amply, very accessibly documented. But I do not think the Romans' customs and ideas can be

understood without comparing them with those of other peoples, usually weaker and sometimes of the most primitive savagery—or so they would have seemed to the Romans. The Romans were not alone among ancient peoples in practising a form of rectilineal planning and orientation. All the great civilizations practise it, all have mythical accounts of its origins, and rituals which guide the planner and the builder. I propose also to consider such parallel accounts to arrive at some estimate of the enormous value which the Romans, and such ancient peoples as have left us records of their beliefs, placed not only on these forms, but also on the procedures by which the forms were drawn. However, always it is the conceptual model and its relation to the place and the plan shape which interest me, rather than the material remains with which the archaeologist must concern himself: definite patterns, definite, assertive configurations of streets and squares, private and public buildings, which will not yield their meaning to the common means of urban analysis.