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CONTINUITY IN THE REBUILDING OF BOMBED CITIES IN WESTERN EUROPE

LEO GREBLER

ABSTRACT

In the rebuilt cities in western Europe the whole pattern of urban reconstruction shows strong evidence of continuity and persistence. No case of abandonment is on record. The economic bases and growth patterns of cities have not changed significantly. With few exceptions, cities and towns have been rebuilt on the same site, and the new city centers occupy the same area as before the war. There are few massive land-use changes. No effort has been made to create a new urban pattern designed for protection against future war.

The gigantic process of European city rebuilding during the last ten years presents social scientists with a case par excellence for examining the continuity and the discontinuities in urban patterns. Theoretically, destruction and reconstruction provided one of the greatest opportunities in history for urban change, both physical and social—an opportunity for redistributing the urban population and activities, for dispersion and deconcentration, for new territorial arrangements of land uses within cities, as well as for physical improvements of urban facilities.

A survey of five western European countries—England, Holland, France, Germany, and Italy—shows impressive evidence of change in certain respects.¹ Change manifests itself in new or radically altered street patterns, developed to accommodate modern traffic; in completely new city centers with less building coverage and lower residential densities; in planning innovations, such as the adoption of “open development” in lieu of the closed blocks that have characterized at least the last hundred years of town building. The buildings in the rebuilt city sections are usually much larger and more efficient than those they replaced. The new housing is sanitary and has more light and air than the slums, many of which fell victim to war’s destruction. Change manifests itself in the architecture of some of the reconstructed areas, while others were deliberately restored to the old model.²

¹ This article is based on a study tour of 28 cities during the latter half of 1954, undertaken with the aid of a grant from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

But when the observer shifts his focus from physical improvements and detail to the entire pattern of urban reconstruction, a great deal of persistence can be detected. All the hundreds of destroyed cities and towns, even those which were most thoroughly wiped out, are being rebuilt. One might have expected that some communities, because their economic base had weakened and their population had for some time been drifting away, would be abandoned. But no case of complete abandonment is on record. The amazing persistence of cities throughout history has again been demonstrated on a massive scale. Cities have disappeared when entire civilizations have fallen. But so long as a civilization was viable, its cities have risen again and again from every kind of disaster. Ghost towns in the United States and elsewhere are altogether negligible exceptions.

The persistence of urban communities after destruction in World War II and in earlier cases as well is probably rooted in social behavior as well as in economics. Contrary to some interpreters of urban life, cities are powerful cohesive elements as well as the seedbeds of social disruption. Urban communities are built on human associations which spell home even when the cities are in ruins.

Cassino was completely reduced to rubble, its inhabitants scattered all over the countryside and in distant cities. Within a

² Some of these changes are or will be described in detail in other journals. See the author’s “New City Centers in Europe,” *Urban Land-News and Trends* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute, April, 1955).

few weeks of the end of active battle, people drifted back to live in caves, cellars, and dugouts, without food or means of livelihood, in an area infested with malaria and 550,000 mines. Their wisdom may be questioned, but their action symbolizes the power of the city over people, even when all its physical features have disappeared. Economic opportunity, even in the context of Italian life, was meager: Cassino has long had a shaky economic base.

THE RETURN OF POPULATION

Persistence is evident generally in the early return of populations to war-devastated cities in the face of incredible hardships. Fred Charles Iklé, in a study that covered the early postwar years,³ presented impressive evidence, which can now be confirmed from the vantage point of 1954. In spite of a pervasive housing shortage and in spite of transportation difficulties and general disorder, the overwhelming majority of the destroyed or heavily damaged communities have a population equaling or exceeding their prewar numbers. Not only have bombed-out or evacuated people and businesses flocked back at the earliest opportunity, but many of the bombed cities have continued to attract migrants from the country and from small towns.

More city dwellers than ever before had an opportunity to get acquainted with alternatives to urban living and, stirred up by war and city destruction, were probably more disposed toward making a choice than under normal circumstances. They chose to return. Of course, the small towns and villages to which they migrated or were evacuated were not ideal communities, and circumstances were unfavorable to adjustment. For that matter, however, the cities to which they went back were by no means functioning normally.

³ Fred Charles Iklé, "The Impact of War upon the Spacing of Urban Population" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1950); see also Iklé's article, "The Effect of War Destruction upon the Ecology of Cities," *Social Forces*, Vol. XXIX, No. 4 (May, 1951).

Perhaps even more striking is the persistence of urban growth patterns and the economic base of cities. Generally, the tremendous dislocations of war destruction have caused no permanent sharp deviations from prewar rates of growth. Cities and towns which were expanding fast before the war have continued to expand rapidly, even in the face of large-scale war damage. Destroyed communities have only temporarily lost trade to undamaged or only slightly damaged cities and towns in their proximity. People in bombed-out Bristol for years went shopping in Bath, Cheltenham, and Taunton, 13-44 miles away, but normal shopping habits have long since been restored. Le Havre, which lost some industry during the early postwar years when housing for workers was inadequate, is now recouping its losses. Growth in some cases might have been faster and certainly more steady in the absence of war damage. On the whole, however, war and destruction have brought surprisingly small permanent changes in the economic base and growth patterns of cities.

Some major exceptions to this observation exist in West Germany. Here the war and its aftermath have produced changes which have lasted to this day and which may have more permanent effects. Germany's partition has created several postwar "profiteers" and postwar losers among cities. Frankfurt has gained from the flight of banks, insurance companies, and industrial headquarters from Berlin and has inherited the fur trade and much of the publishing business of Leipzig. Hanover has also attracted many firms and institutions from Berlin and East German cities and has developed the West German equivalent of the Leipzig Fair. Bonn, of course, has expanded from a somewhat sleepy university town to a government center. On the other hand, there are several cases of population loss: Berlin, a city torn by political and economic division; Cologne, which is far behind in reconstruction; Cassel and other German cities near the Russian zone, which have lost part of their hinterland and are politically

so exposed that people and business firms shy away from them. Kiel, Hamburg, and Darmstadt are among the German cities suffering from a decline in their prewar economic base, but they are making valiant efforts to replace the losses.

The tremendous scale of city destruction in Germany and the influx of millions of expelled persons and refugees have also produced unusual differences in the growth of large cities and small towns. Considering the fact that West Germany now has a population of 50,000,000 as against 39,000,000 before the war, most of its heavily bombed and larger cities have gained much less than proportionately. On the other hand, many undamaged small towns have doubled in size, partly because expelled persons and refugees were deliberately settled in them. But the pattern is already changing. Increasing numbers of refugee families have been permitted to move to the large industrial centers, for they are short on labor, while many of the small communities offer only insufficient employment. By bringing industry to the small towns that had an influx of population and by holding down the larger centers, West Germany might have been able to effect major urban decentralization. According to German experts, however, a large-scale transfer of industry to the small towns would have been too costly. Moreover, many of the smaller communities that had dramatic increases in population are near the Russian zone; entrepreneurs as well as the government considered industrial investment in that area too great a political hazard. The whole atmosphere of postwar Germany militated against planned reindustrialization upon a new spatial basis.

Most of the changes in urban growth patterns and in the economic base of German cities must be attributed to military defeat and political partition rather than to war destruction as such.

PERSISTENCE OF CITY LOCATION

Practically all cities and towns, even those which were completely destroyed, have been rebuilt on the same site. Here,

again, one might have assumed that some locations would have become so obsolete that destruction would provide an opportunity for wholesale relocation. But roads and rails, underground utilities, rivers and port sites, have remained powerful physical determinants of city location, and even though some of the man-made facilities were damaged, tradition and pride were motives to reduplicate the original forms. There is a (perhaps apocryphal) story that immediately after the war Polish leaders considered relocating Warsaw until they were reminded of Hitler's boast that Warsaw would not be rebuilt in a thousand years. John Steinbeck reports that the Soviets debated moving Stalingrad to a different site, but "a dogged determination that the city . . . should, for sentimental reasons, be restored exactly where it had been," as well as the existence of underground utilities, militated against a transfer.⁴

A few small towns and villages in Italy have been moved from hilltops and mountainsides to near-by plains, since the reasons for their original location—malaria in the lowlands and the need for protection against enemies and robbers—no longer existed. But many more have been rebuilt where they were before; tradition won out over rational considerations. And some of the attempted relocations have not been quite complete; the hilltops have been partially built up again, while other groups of buildings have been constructed down below. This has resulted in "split communities" similar to those which sometimes developed in the age of railroad building when the railroad station in the plains gave rise to a new urban nucleus (the "basso" part of the town) in addition to the old one on the hill (the "alto").

Cassino is the best-known case of relocation. Here a whole town has been moved from its precarious and hemmed-in position on the mountainside to an adjoining level site 1,500–2,000 feet away. The ruins of old

⁴ John Steinbeck, *A Russian Journal* (New York, 1948), p. 132; see also Michel Gordey, *Visa to Moscow* (New York, 1952), p. 363.

Cassino, so thoroughly leveled that they are hardly visible, have been declared a national monument where no construction is permitted, and they are being beautified by green plantings. The new town occupies an area about ten times as large as the old one. Significantly, the new site lies in the path of Cassino's prewar growth.

Outside Italy the only recorded case of relocation is the Dutch village of Empel in the province of Brabant, a bad case of ribbon development which was given up in favor of a site 2 miles away. There was some discussion—never serious—about leaving the rubble peninsula of Saint-Malo as a war memorial and rebuilding farther south on the mainland, where the new town could be joined to two existing communities. Saint-Servan and Paramé. But a strong feeling of tradition and a well-developed appreciation of Saint-Malo's value as a tourist attraction prevented the adoption of this radical solution.

NEW CENTERS ON OLD SITES

Persistence is evident in the replacement of the great majority of ruined city centers on the same site. Scores of central business districts were so severely destroyed that some locational change was at least a strong possibility. But only two cases of relocated city centers are on record in the five countries: Bristol and Kiel.

The case for relocation in Bristol rests primarily on topography. The old business center of 16 gross acres was felt to be too small for the expanding city, particularly if its narrow streets were to be widened. Expansion was difficult because the area was confined by waterways and an ancient moat and wall involving a 30-foot drop. Building tall structures offered no solution, since the demand was mainly for retail facilities. Thus the business district was moved to a site of about 25 gross acres adjoining the old center to the north, an area of highly mixed land uses that was also heavily destroyed. The old retail quarter is to be used as a civic and education center. Whatever the merits of the case, there is little doubt that the

move has slowed reconstruction. The planners who were for it and the business groups that were against it were locked in fierce and time-consuming struggles. Also, the compulsory purchase by the city of land in the new as well as in the old area has required, at least temporarily, larger financial outlays.

The main shopping area of Kiel has been shifted from a war-damaged site north of the Altstadt to an area south of it that is nearer the railroad station. Here destruction seems to have hastened a development that had already begun before the war.

If war destruction was to be used as an opportunity for relocating the business district within a built-up city, one of the necessary conditions was heavy war damage in two areas: the old site and a new site of suitable size and location. For, quite apart from the question of financial compensation and the resulting burden on the public purse, no country or city could afford to throw away existing real estate assets while urban facilities were extremely scarce. The condition of two destroyed sites was rarely met. In Rotterdam, for example, a case might have been made for moving the business center to the west, in line with tendencies apparent before the war. But it so happened that the area west of the old business district was only slightly damaged, and wholesale demolition of existing buildings was considered impossible.

While instances of the relocation of entire business centers are rare, the opportunity presented by destruction has been used in many cases for enlarging the prewar sites of the business center. The core of the city has lost none of its essential functions, and the new center usually provides more facilities than before the war for performing these functions.

Persistence is evident in the relatively slight permanent effect of the gigantic wartime dislocations of business firms. Destruction tore the very fabric of the intricate relationships that cause firms to concentrate in certain urban areas. Linkages were broken, and establishments that had thrived on proximity to others could no longer survive

in the old way. Space anywhere was at a premium. One might have expected that a reshuffling of such magnitude would have some major lasting effects. Entrepreneurs would discover that their old sites were poor; the inertia that is so great an obstacle to efficient location would be overcome. But, measured against the scale of wartime displacement, significant permanent shifts are few and far between. The only massive change has occurred in housing, where the decongestion of central city areas has accelerated peripheral development.

NO ADAPTATION TO THE ATOMIC AGE

Few, if any, precautions against future war can be detected in the rebuilding of European cities. After the incredible shock of bombing experienced by millions of city dwellers, one might have anticipated an irresistible popular demand for an urban pattern designed for protection. But no wholesale decentralization or dispersal has been attempted. Special reinforcements of structural elements of new buildings are required in only a few places (such as the City of London). Provisions for bomb shelters are rare. Decongestion of central city areas, wider streets, more open space, and the creation of industrial districts away from the centers have been motivated by the desire to create better cities rather than the need for protection, although the threat of war has sometimes been used as a subsidiary argument for these measures. The same is true for the new towns and the government-planned industrial relocation in Great Britain. That so little heed has been given in European city reconstruction to providing protection against future wars may be improvidence or defeatism in the face of the overwhelming new weapons of destruction. Basically, however, this remarkable phenomenon reflects the same attitude that caused people to return to the bombed cities in spite of the crowding and makeshift.

SOME DETERMINANTS OF CONTINUITY

When Europe's cities were being laid waste, there were high hopes that compensa-

tory benefits would come from the holocaust: the present generation might be freed from some of the errors of the past. Planners could start with a clean slate, and the new cities would reflect modern technology and our improved knowledge of the social, economic, and aesthetic requirements for good urban living.

These expectations were widely shared. Much of the planning literature of the war and early postwar period postulates, if it does not predict, the emergence of reshaped cities and new kinds of urban living and, indeed, the dawn of an age of planning that would remake our whole urban civilization.⁵ Lord Reith's exhortation to "plan boldly" became the slogan of the day. Measured against these expectations, Europe's rebuilt cities are disappointing. There are far fewer cases of radical innovation than many of the planner had hoped to see. The whole pattern of urban reconstruction is one of continuity. Changes in most of the rebuilt cities are timid, contrasting with the bold anticipation of new kinds of urban communities. The "believers" will look in vain for a sample of Le Corbusier's skyscraper city⁶ or for a pro-

⁵ See, for example, the essay on "Social Foundations of Postwar Building," in Lewis Mumford, *City Development* (New York, 1945); C.B. Purdom, *How Should We Rebuild London?* (London, 1945); *Land Settlement and Town Planning* ("Rebuilding Britain Series," No. 11 [January, 1945]); M. André Vera, "Opportunité de l'urbanisme," in *Urbanisme* (Paris, 1945); E. A. Gutkind, *Creative Demobilization* (London, 1943); Dr. Kurt Blaum, "Wiederaufbau zerstörter Städte" (an address delivered November 1, 1945, Frankfurt a.M.).

⁶ Le Corbusier, upon invitation by a group of young industrialists, actually designed a skyscraper city for St-Dié, a French city in the Vosges Mountains with 20,000 population, which was heavily destroyed. The plan provided for "vertical" apartment blocks with a battery of communal services in the mode of the designer's *Unité d'habitation* in Marseilles, as well as for some garden-type apartments and a new civic center (*Architectural Record*, October, 1946). The plan was not executed. Instead, St-Dié was rebuilt in conventional style but with considerable modification of the street pattern. One may well question whether Le Corbusier's plan fits in at all with the realities of St-Dié, an overgrown village gone industrial. To bring vast green areas into a city where lovely forests are within easy walk-

tototype of Frank Lloyd Wright's broadacre city or of other idealized types of communities. The new towns in England approximate Ebenezer Howard's garden city, but they are only remotely associated with programs of rebuilding.

It would be a grievous mistake, however, to condemn European city reconstruction solely because it has not come up to the levels of earlier aspiration. For most of the explicit or implicit assumptions underlying the wartime expectations were proved false by postwar realities. The city folk did not heed the romantics but returned in droves to cities in rubble. The men and machines employed in war could not simply be diverted to a gigantic revision of the city, for people after the war wanted many things in addition to better cities. And when reconstruction had to be tackled in earnest, it became clear that the assumption of a great "opportunity" for building radically different communities was based on a variety of optical and other illusions.

When people looked at the devastated cities during the war, what had been left standing escaped attention. They usually had an exaggerated impression of the size of destroyed areas. Newspaper reports on the extent of damage were in like manner overdramatic and exaggerated.

The planner faced with the actual task of reconstruction could not help focusing on the large sections still standing, for these delimited his opportunities. While some small towns, such as Saint-Malo in France, Cassino in Italy, and Freudenstadt in Germany, were almost wiped out, even the most savage bombing had often accomplished an incomplete job of destruction in the larger cities. Some centers, it is true, were 50-80

per cent destroyed, but this often left unaffected a large portion of the whole urban area, or volume of building or taxable values—even if additional destruction and spot damage in other districts are considered. When C. B. Purdom in 1945 urged the "rebuilding" of London, he failed to acknowledge that about 90 per cent of the County of London remained intact or was only slightly damaged. It is a stark fact that a city cannot be made over if 90 or 80 or even 70 per cent of it has been saved from destruction. In such a situation, the bulk of the city must still be rebuilt in the slow, more or less piecemeal, fashion in which a city renews itself in peacetime conditions.

Moreover, the bombs did not always fall where they would do the least harm or the most good from the viewpoint of replanning and rebuilding the city. Even in the areas of vast destruction, whole buildings or groups of buildings were often untouched or only slightly damaged.⁷ Regardless of the difficulties of financial compensation, no country emerging from the war with a scarcity of urban facilities of every kind could afford to demolish on any large scale structures that had escaped the fury. The slate was much less clean than had been assumed. A student of London's history has estimated that the Great Fire of 1666 proportionately did more physical damage than the destruction inflicted by air raids on any English city.

Even where planners had a relatively free hand, as in England and Holland, boldness

⁷ Only 9 per cent of the total acreage of the County of London in 1949 was accounted for by war-damaged and temporary buildings and vacant land potentially available for construction. Of dwellings, about 80,000 (August, 1945) were estimated to be destroyed or beyond repair, in a total of about 850,000 dwellings (London County Council, *Development Plan, 1951*, "Analysis," pp. 28-29). Exact measurement of war damage is extremely difficult, depending upon whether land area, taxable values, buildings, floor area of structures, or dwelling units are taken as bases. There is no comparability in estimates between different countries or sometimes even between different cities in the same country. The accounting for partial damage of varying degrees of severity is especially problematical.

ing distance would seem to be uncalled for. To design "communal houses" for the strongly individualistic population of St-Dié would seem to be utterly unrealistic. This case highlights one of the difficulties with startlingly new planning ideas and one of the reasons why they were not adopted. Some of the advanced designers attempted to impose their preconceived ideas on places for which they were not suitable.

was held in check by financial considerations. Cities were in a hurry to restore taxable resources and trade and were thus under pressure to compromise. Even though they owned the land in reconstruction areas and could theoretically dictate the manner of rebuilding, they needed private developers willing to stake their money on new construction and, in many cases, had to accede to their wishes.

The amount of change effected was also limited by the necessity for those nations which were weakened by war to resort to various economizing devices. This was true particularly of Germany and Italy. Making maximum use of the existing underground utilities is one such device. Another is the utilization of foundations and walls of gutted buildings. Much of Hamburg was rebuilt in this way. The "opportunities" in most cases were far more limited than had been anticipated, and so were the resources for the rebuilding task, which came at a time of overwhelming pressures on manpower and materials.

Finally, the strength of persistence and continuity in European city reconstruction can perhaps be fully understood only against the background of western European society as a whole. People are much less mobile than in the New World; the spectacular postwar migrations in Germany are

exceptional. Family and group attachments to particular cities and even neighborhoods are much stronger than in our country and other young countries. The far greater importance of status still lends a high degree of fixity to location, occupation, and property ownership. The transfer of urban as well as rural land is much less frequent than in the United States. Businessmen are generally more conservative and tradition-bound. Affection for the visible heritage of a long, rich, and proud past, the historical monuments, churches, and treasured buildings, is widespread and has been intensified by destruction. One must comprehend the dimensions of European tradition, in time and depth, to appreciate the power of the status quo.

If later studies of city rebuilding were to include eastern European and Asian countries, these cultural determinants could be examined in more detail and with greater confidence. Meanwhile, it is significant that a detailed study of Okayama, a heavily destroyed city in Japan, has also highlighted the persistence and continuity in the distribution of population and in land-value patterns.⁸

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⁸ Amos H. Hawley, "Land Value Patterns in Okayama, Japan, 1940 and 1952," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. LX, No. 5 (March, 1955).