

The Urban Crisis

"After the question of keeping world peace, metropolitan planning is probably the most serious single problem faced by man in the second half of the 20th century."

This declaration from a report by the World Health Organization of the United Nations is a striking summary of the crisis of cities and the urgent need for action. The report does not mince words. Migration of rural population to urban areas in the developing countries may reach "catastrophic dimensions" in the next twenty years in terms of health, sanitation and substandard living conditions. Highly developed countries are facing a different kind of urban disaster involving air pollution, traffic, noise, congestion and substandard living conditions of greater sophistication but equally damaging effect.

This century is characterized by the most massive population movements and the most monumental city-building and expansion programs over the largest surface of the earth that history has ever seen. The urban explosion is shared by Communist and capitalist countries alike. Statistics of change are overwhelming and their implications terrifying.

But no one need look to the United States for precedent-setting policies in handling the world's number two problem. America is the country of non-plan. Cars continue to invade the cities at a multiplication rate shared only by rabbits, trees are defoliated, smog is a health menace, urban immobility is a daily threat, and the Federal Government does everything except gift-wrap highways while backing and filling over hesitant moves to aid badly needed public transportation. The United States has a Department of Agriculture but no Department of Urban Affairs, though in fifteen years 80 per cent of the population of this country will be concentrated in cities. The urban renewal program is out of funds. A city like New York still has no master plan. Resources are wasted, the stigma of formless sprawl is on the land.

Control is a wicked word, even for the greater democratic good; and freedom apparently includes the right to consign cities to chaos for private speculative profit. The warnings are shouted by congested streets and shoddy buildings. The price is being paid physically, in health hazards and cities that don't work; emotionally, in frustration and neuroses, and, esthetically, in sheer, solid ugliness. It is inconceivable that the immense resources of brains, money, science and art that mark our time as clearly as does the urban crisis cannot be harnessed to solve it.