

Planning Our Communities

The British, abandoning their usual taste for careful understatement, have come up with "the biggest planning project in the free world." The scale and scope of this proposal for the planned redevelopment of the entire populous southeast of England—including the design of new cities and towns and the expansion of present ones—is staggering even to Americans who consider themselves masters at thinking big.

The fact is that we think small about one of the largest problems of our time. The population explosion is a reality and so is the wasteful exploitation of land that has followed in its wake. The ravages of unplanned expansion have reached the stage of almost criminal negligence in terms of the thoughtless and irreversible misuse of dwindling resources.

Planning is simply looking ahead, sensibly, to keep crisis from turning into catastrophe. The challenge of the environment—something none of us can escape—is one of the most serious of this century. Our response is invariably too little and too late.

Our "New Town" movement has started fifteen years behind Europe's, an after-the-fact reaction to land already squandered and damage already done. The first real attempt to do a better job of community planning is in the housing legislation now before Congress. This legislation is being fought by real estate groups, which want to cut back its critical provisions for Government assistance to community development. "We can do it better ourselves," they say. But the evidence is incontrovertible; they haven't.

Even the best planning is a calculated gamble involving some unpredictable risks. Yet, by providing the only orderly, flexible framework for growth, it gives the only decent odds for a decent environment. The British are taking the plunge while we drag our feet. The stakes are high: the country's physical future and the way we live.