

## *America: Land of the Disposable Environment*

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Western Europe has had a ten-to-twenty years' start on almost every urban problem that is currently being wrestled with in the United States, and has produced an enlightening array of applicable successes and fiascos.

To ignore the lessons Europe has learned, and as a result to make the same mistakes all over again, is too slow, costly and foolish a process for anything so critical as the state of American cities and the urgency of American housing needs. But that is exactly what we are doing—even in the belated, protracted debates that led finally to the establishment of a Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development at least a generation after other countries had recognized the need for action.

### **Twenty-Year Lag**

The United States is twenty years behind Britain, for example, in facing the seriousness and magnitude of the urban explosion and the necessity for its constructive control. The British New Towns Act was passed in 1946 and subsequently amended to make it possible for the Ministry of Housing and Local Government to direct the building of complete new communities in logical and functional relationship to existing cities and regions.

In Sweden, Stockholm's municipal rapid transit is the core of a series of satellite suburbs

for 70,000 to 100,000 each, drawn up for development in 1952 and now strung along a handsome new subway like small, sparkling jewels of urban design.

In the Netherlands, Amsterdam projected a comprehensive expansion plan as early as 1935, with flexible designation of future growth areas until the year 2000. It has been fulfilled in 1965.

### **Crisis Breeds Action**

Turn almost anywhere in Europe and the response to the crisis of cities has been government action. Some of the results are better than others and many problems remain to be solved. Housing shortages are still critical and traffic jams are terrifying. English planners cheerfully correct their mistakes as they move from one new town to another. Frankfurt's Nordweststadt has reduced the pioneering principles of 1920's Bauhaus planning to Bauhaus banality. Dutch cities are increasingly paralyzed by the bottlenecks and uniformity of complete state control.

But Northern Europe is producing some of the handsomest and most human housing in the world. New towns like Tapiola in Finland and Cumbernauld in Scotland are coping creatively with twentieth-century problems in twentieth-century terms, and old cities everywhere are acquiring land for growth, renewal and investment.

European administrators are

uniformly incredulous of the giant selloff of land owned by the City of New York in Staten Island, which still continues. The most conspicuous housing failure here is the most conspicuous success abroad. The European architect-planner is much more aware of the subtle and all-important relationship of buildings to landscape, and of planning and siting for the creation of an optimum esthetic and social environment.

Almost every European professional admits that planning is an empirical science and an art of trial and error. The lesson that comes out of Europe, begging to be understood, is that this is an incredibly complex business involving many related factors and unpredictable side effects. Its concerns range equally from the esthetics of environmental design to corrosive social problems. Without correcting the latter, environmental design is useless. The new department will have to deal with both.

But in the United States, where the sheer volume of construction is so great that we will virtually rebuild the country by the end of the century, the physical part of planning can no longer be ignored.

There is a very simple reason why we are so far behind the European accomplishments and why so much of our housing is, ultimately, so bad. It takes time and money to plan and build complete communities, initiate new designs and use land well.

The American builder, no matter how big, is still too small and too limited in capital to risk anything new. With few exceptions, he will not break the pattern of what has sold previously, because it must sell again and it must sell fast.

### **Job for Giants**

Only government or the American corporate giants, with the ability to make multimillion dollar investments without the necessity of short-term loans and short-term payoffs, can afford to break the mold of housing mediocrity in the United States. To do so, they must be willing to break the conventional investment mold as well. A very few are showing the way: Gulf Oil has backed the planned new town of Reston, Va., and Connecticut General is behind the sociologically designed community of Columbia, Md. There are infinite possibilities for progress in government and private collaboration.

Meanwhile, back on Capitol Hill, the only provisions for pulling together American suburban sprawl into any semblance of thoughtfully planned communities have been knocked out of the past two housing bills. Hardly anyone noticed. In a country with an increasingly disposable culture, the idea of a disposable environment is still taken for granted.

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