

Suburbia Threatened

The Greenwich, Conn., Planning and Zoning Commission's rejection of the proposed new Xerox plant as "antithetical to good planning practice," suggests that suburbia is having second thoughts about the corporate invasion. Although other communities have moved to jump into the breach with offers of industrially zoned land, the long-standing welcome to emigrating businesses may be coming to an end. What looked like a cornucopia of benefits—tax returns, jobs (sometimes) and "clean" industry in sanitized prestige structures—has turned out to be a mixed blessing, environmentally.

The first serious question was raised some years ago by a Westchester study that proved that the costs of the necessarily increased services canceled out the tax benefits. The buildings, often corporate Versailles designed with regal abandon, began to look less beautiful. But it is the joining of environmental to economic objections that has brought suburbia to the barricades. As more corporations arrived, the impact in terms of traffic, noise, air pollution and other environmental factors became measurable.

On these grounds, local objections to commercial incursion can be valid. The corporate headquarters, except in carefully zoned industrial areas, is beginning to be seen as a threat in a class with uncontrolled housing. The corporate controversy only highlights the whole agonizing problem of how to preserve handsome and pleasurable surroundings while facing the reality of land-use pressures and human need.

The solution chosen in Greenwich and many other places — protective, exclusionary, large-lot residential zoning with implicit racial and economic discrimination—is no solution at all. It is a desperate short-term defense against the loss of natural resources and environmental amenities. The outsider advocating radical change in the name of liberal democracy offers no better answer; it is not his way of life that is threatened.

But the suburb cannot secede from the region, or the world. The forces in motion are inescapable. What is essential is the kind of intelligent and sensitive planning that can develop appropriate policies for the locality and the region. There are values to be preserved as well as doors to be opened. The land-use dilemma is one more American crisis on a growing national scale.

If rational programs cannot be devised to deal with the problem constructively, it would be a tragedy even greater than the current deadlock. Suburbia cannot stay behind its barricades forever.