' Clusters' Instead of 'Slurbs': Along with 'New Towns,' they are an ...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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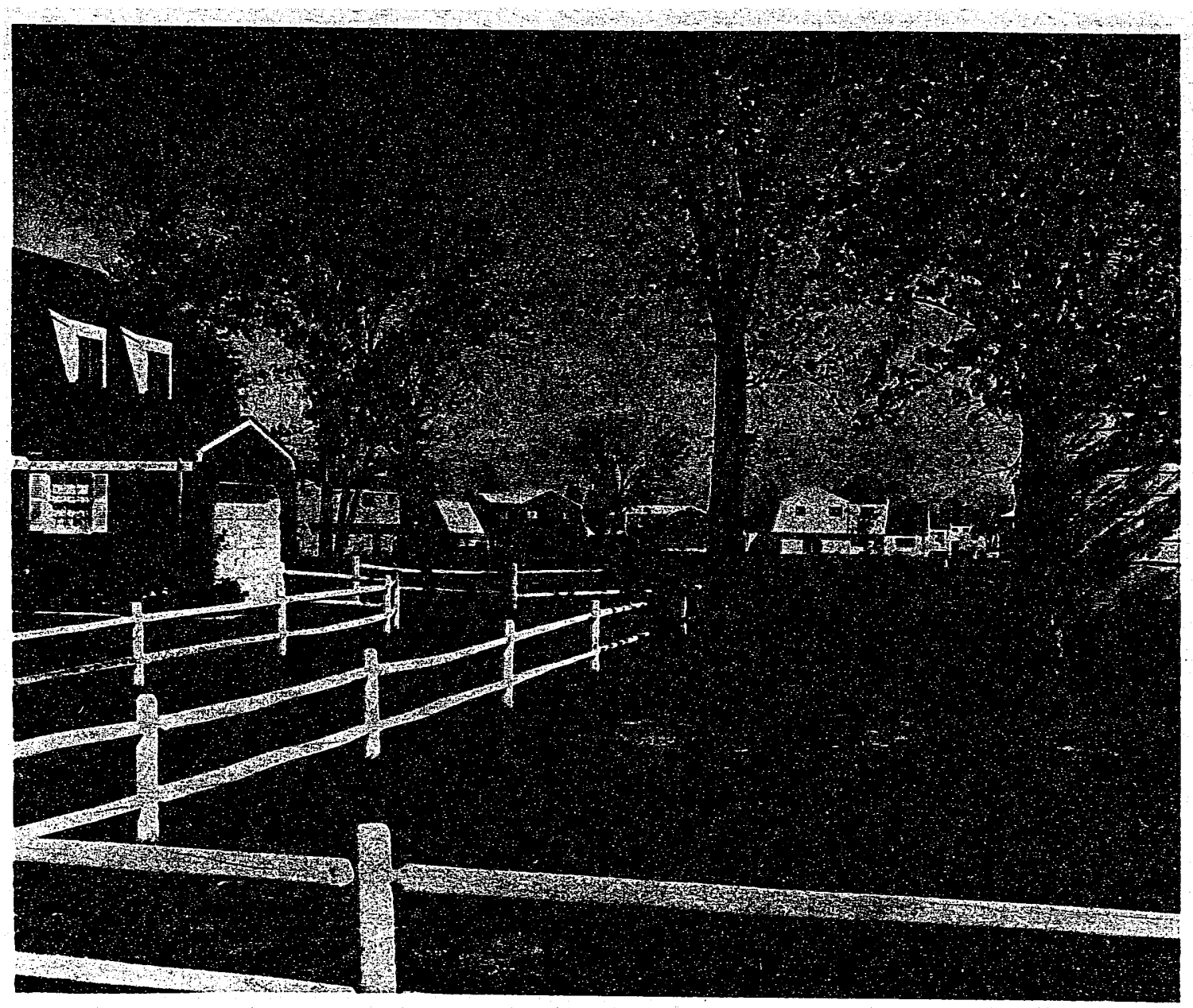

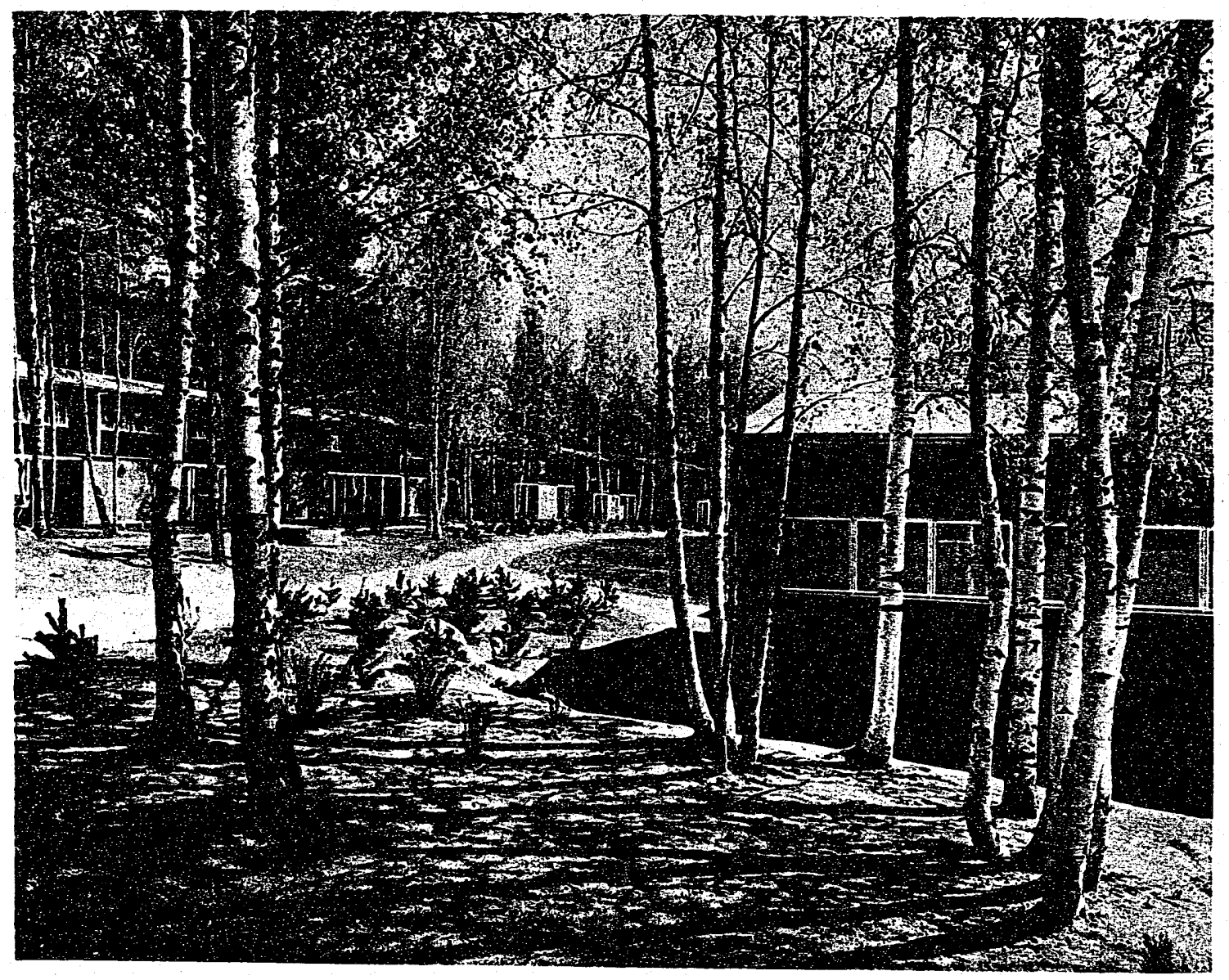

PROBLEM—Rows of standardized houses close-packed on identical lots have made the American suburbs a monotonous no man's land, neither town nor country.

SOLUTION: THE CLUSTER—One new way of organizing a housing development arranges the homes in clusters instead of spreading them out in rows over evenly spaced lots. This leaves plots of open ground that can be shared by everyone. The houses can be separate dwellings set in a curve around a common green, as at Village Green in Hillsboro, N. J. (top); or they may be row houses grouped in clusters, as at Tapiola in Finland (bottom). The difference between old and new is the better use of the land.

SOLUTION: THE NEW TOWN—Planned communities, complete with commercial, industrial and recreation areas and schools as well as residential sections are another answer to dull and disorganized suburban expansion. This is a model of Reston, a New Town development under construction in Virginia. It will cover 6,800 acres and eventually house 75,000 people.

'Clusters' Instead of 'Slurbs'

Along with 'New Towns,' they are an innovation in residential developments that may help to rescue the suburban dream from the nightmare of mass-produced housing.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IN the United States this year, $23 billion worth of suburban houses will go up. In the 19 years since the war, the suburban development has sprawled across the country, to change the American landscape and the American way of life.

The boom in suburbia has resulted from the romantic pursuit of a dream and the real need for shelter. The dream of the good life of domestic bliss in a sylvan setting was inherited from the 19th-century English planners who had preached a persuasive sermon of everyman's home-of-his-own-in-the-country, a kind of quasi-rural retreat into peace and privacy. The real need was the wartime housing shortages that were never satisfied, and the insatiable peacetime demand for homes as the war generation settled down to family life. But somewhere along the way the suburban dream turned into the subdivision nightmare, the dreary look-alike developments, the slums of the future, the "slurbs."

The sins of suburbia are now familiar to the point of boredom, but ignoring them won't make them disappear. Fortunately, they are no longer being ignored. Improvement may be at hand, with two heartening innovations — the "cluster development" and the New Town, or entirely planned community. Such projects received official encouragement two weeks ago in the President's housing message, which scored "sprawling, space-consuming, unplanned and uneconomic" expansion and proposed legislation to promote more orderly suburban growth.

THE need for action is clear from coast to coast. Long Island fields and farms have been invaded by regimented hordes of split-levels lined up for miles in close, unlovely rows. Boxes called homes march ruthlessly across the prairies of the Middle West. The orange trees of Orange County, near Los Angeles, have been replaced by houses jammed onto 60-by-120-foot lots, as a 10-year boom has pushed farmland from $2,000 to $23,000 an acre.

A leading magazine in the field, House & Home, refers to the promoters of these mass-marketed houses as "stumblebums" who put together their developments with a few switches on stock floor plans and facades for a transparently superficial kind of variety. Fake hand-hewn shingles, imitation fieldstone, patterned aluminum siding, corny cut-out door and window frames, transform the standardized box into what could be called "Dutch Colonial Ranch," "Cape Cod Split Level," or the glory of development glories, complete with scalloped wood eaves, chalet shutters and tacked-on trellises—the "Hansel and Gretel," as it is known to the trade. Regional variations are limited to local preferences for Williamsburg colors or California pastels, New England clapboard or Florida stucco.

Inside, the hack house appeals through gadgets. What is sold is not a house, but double wall ovens and dishwashers, built-in blenders, inlaid vinyl floors over concrete slabs of doubtful thickness, glamorous gold plastic in claustrophobic bathrooms, knotty pine veneer. If the gleaming appliances are enshrined in too-small rooms with too-thin walls, if the layout is bad and the plaster cracks, a girl's best friend is still her washer-dryer, and every builder knows it.

The damage from all this is social, cultural, psychological and emotional, as well as esthetic. The sociologists tell us of the disasters of the one-class community where mass produced developers' housing herds one age group, one economic level and one color into homes as alike as their owners. The psychologists tell us that the bliss of togetherness has turned into the neuroses of development-inspired ennui. The statisticians tell us of the disenchantment that has started a trend back to the cities. The critics point to the devastated countryside and the minimal dwellings of a sameness that promotes stultifying monotony.

SUBURBAN Christmas is a cheap plastic Santa Claus in a shopping-center parking lot surrounded by asphalt and a sea of cars. Suburban spring is not a walk in the awakening woods, but mud in the poorly built roads. Suburban life is no voyage of discovery or private exploration of the world's wonders, natural and man-made; it is cliché conformity as far as the eye can see, with no stimulation of the spirit through quality of environment.

What has gone wrong? Looking at the results of almost two decades of frenetic building, one can see clearly that a basic fault is suburban house design (it would be ludicrous to call it architec- *(Continued on Page 40)*

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ture). Virtually none of the vast mass of new housing is conceived as a plan—a plan to utilize the natural features of the land or to provide the unifying services, facilities and amenities necessary for any attractive and well-functioning community.

OBVIOUSLY, this is a blueprint that no architect or planner has made. No architect today worthy of his training considers architecture anything less than an environmental art — building design plus land use and site planning, as well as the relationship of each building to its immediate neighbors and to the total group. It is a shocking fact that more than 90 per cent of builders' houses are not designed by architects and that planners are rarely consulted — even when a town-size development is involved. It is an equally shocking fact that too many architects just are not interested in this most critical building field, or are not conversant enough with its problems to do the job well.

Most suburban homes are speculators' houses, without benefit of professional services. They are put up for a quick return and sold as merchandise. They bear absolutely no relationship to any other factors in an increasingly chaotic environment approaching an advanced stage of congestion. What the American house buyer is offered, with distressingly few exceptions, is a poor product of market-tested minimums. The minimum F.H.A. requirements have become the speculative builder's maximums, and once the inadequate formula has been accepted by a defenseless public, it is rubber-stamped on the landscape. The suburban builder has succeeded in carrying off a truly formidable feat — the standardization of America on a surprisingly low level.

THE process is aided and abetted by zoning and building codes. The zoning laws of many communities virtually outlaw the possibility of new or different solutions. Most zoning is based on a negative set of restrictions: exact acreage required per house, prohibition of commercial with residential use, specification of distances between houses and of heights, outlawing of flat roofs. This adds up to a rigid mold or stereotype that admits no flagrant residential violations—and admits no variety. The status quo is preserved.

Local building codes vary to the point of absurdity and are generally as up to date as the Model T. And if local codes permit a new design, the unions may not. It is no secret that labor is frequently unsympathetic to processes or materials that can cut building costs or time, and that the building industry is riddled with expensive archaisms.

FINANCING also discourages innovations. The requirements of the F.H.A. for obtaining federally insured mortgages are not geared to change; the builder must fit his houses into still another mold. F.H.A. could not be more specific about construction details and materials. The F.H.A. requirements are justifiable attempts to guarantee structural soundness but that prevents other, sometimes more efficient, ways of doing the same thing. Private lending institutions are conservative to the point of reaction in their financing attitudes, since the familiar, even if bad, is a preferred risk to the unknown. They lend on the basis of what has already been done, not on what might be done that could be better.

What suburbia needs today ranges from the more imaginative and responsible use of just a few acres of land to the professional, long-range planning of entire new towns on a community level. There is a discernible movement toward more thoughtful layout of houses and open space in a better planned use of land; this is an urgent necessity as open land shrinks under the population onslaught and the builders' depredations.

THE trend toward better land use is being helped by a joint research program of the Urban Land Institute and the National Association of Home Builders. The first visible result is the "cluster development," a way of dividing a suburban tract to eliminate the familiar gridiron pattern of monotonously repeated houses on evenly spaced lots. It groups the houses more closely, and often irregularly, in clusters, as part of a carefully and pleasantly related plan, leaving a larger proportion of open land for all of the houses to share.

In cluster developments there is private land, which includes the house plots, and common land, from which all the houses benefit. The common land is often a community "green," in the tradition of the New England village. The green can be park or woods, or a cooperative recreation area like a golf course or swimming pool. (The golf course is usually the first thing built, before a single house goes up.) Common land is maintained by a home owners' association or deeded to the town or country as parkland.

In many areas, the new developments cannot be built without zoning revisions, and the builders have helped bring about the revisions through a

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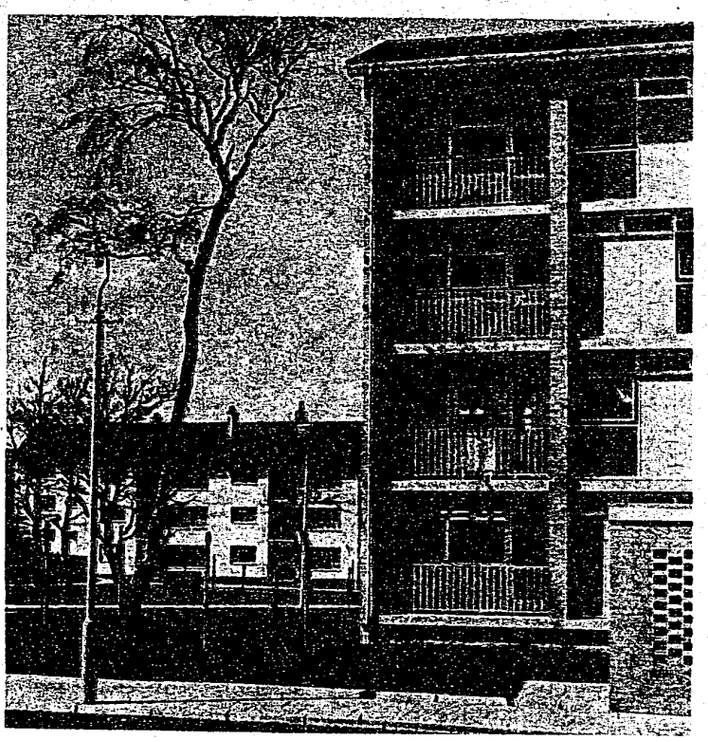
more flexible law called "density zoning," which specifies the number of people permitted per acre, without spelling out the arrangement of land and houses. F.H.A. has already come up with a new set of land-use regulations to meet the changing trends.

These new cluster developments can be as small as the 16 dwellings in three buildings designed as a continuous housing strip on a hillside bordering a golf course in San Rafael, Calif., known as Peacock Gap Terrace, or as big as a 964-acre project called Hunting Creek, now under construction in Jefferson County, Ky. They all avoid the repeated single house pattern

liam H. Whyte, Jr., who was responsible for the landmark Fortune study of urban problems, "The Exploding Metropolis." According to the report, "the verdict of the market place is yes."

ONE cluster, Village Green, in Hillsboro, N.J., was completely sold out in six months while conventional houses in the same neighborhood, by the same builders, went begging. Huntington Continental, a 52-acre project on former agricultural land at Huntington Beach, Calif., is a cluster group of connected "town houses in the country" with 22 acres of common land. A record sale — 685 of 751 dwellings — was made in six months and the



IN SCOTLAND—One of the four residential areas of East Kilbride, a New Town near Glasgow designed for a population of 70,000.

by including row or town houses, and even apartment towers. The different accommodations meet different needs and provide visual and social variety.

THE result is better-sited, better-looking, more interesting kinds of houses, more open, unspoiled land saved from the bulldozer, and a more "natural" environment. Homes may be grouped around a stream or ravine; a stand of woods may be left untouched. Because there are actually savings for the builder of cluster developments in shared mechanical facilities, party walls, and more salable "choice" sites, the consumer gets a lot more house for the money. For $11,000-$14,000 he finds space and extras now usually available only for $15,000-$20,000.

The advantages are obvious, and they have already proved persuasive to the house buyer. The trail-blazing cluster developments have been spectacularly successful. Fifty-six of these projects are being measured in a searching and authoritative report by the American Conservation Association, under the editorship of Wil-

local F.H.A. office was so stampeded by builders who had got the message and wanted to change old plans to new ones, that reinforcements had to be sent from Washington.

Edward Eichler, the California builder who pioneered with architect-designed modern houses in the San Francisco area, turned to clusters with a town-house scheme built around a common at Santa Clara, which sold out in 18 months. Georgetown South, in Manassas, Va., is an immensely popular East Coast version of the same idea.

There is, of course, the danger that cluster houses will contain some of the same faults as other development homes — poor plans, construction and design — and that some irresponsible builders, with a penchant for the cheap copy and a fast buck, will turn them into a set of cut-rate building clichés. But even then there will be some gain from the improved site planning and land use.

The second major breakthrough in the suburban scene has been the creation of com-

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plete communities called New Towns. England and Scandinavia have led the way, with government construction of New Towns. The United States has been extraordinarily slow to follow, relying on private enterprise. All of the obstacles already listed, plus politics, militate against the establishment of New Towns here, but even so, about 20 are now in the design or building stage.

JUST what is a New Town? The accepted criteria call for a population of at least 20,000; land under a single ownership or control; a town scheme conforming to a metropolitan or regional plan; provision for a variety of uses, including commercial, industrial and civic as well as residential, and a diversity of residents, including all races, incomes, family sizes and social levels. Often, a New Town may have its own economic base, and industrial and commercial zones are provided. Before a single house plot is allocated in a New Town, there are thorough professional studies of the topography, land use, population trends, transportation patterns, growth potential and relationship to neighboring communities so that the best scientific planning can be brought to bear.

At least half the projects claiming to be New Towns are in California, but one of the best is Reston, 18 miles west of Washington in Fairfax County, Va. A 6,800-acre development, it will eventually house 75,000 people. Robert Simon, Reston's promoter, has put together a star team of consultants, ranging from planning to graphics, to establish a superior level of quality and design. A Ford grant has been given to the Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies to record its problems and progress.

RESTON'S plan, by New York architects Whittlesey and Conklin, focuses on sympathetic and dramatic use of landscape features as the basis of seven coordinated, recreation-oriented villages, and it has the promise of handsome, sophisticated houses in three cluster groups by the New York firm and by Washington architects Charles Goodman and Chloethiel Smith. The rendering of Reston's "first village," now under construction, is an enticing vision.

Inevitably, New Towns may fall short of their objectives, and even share some of suburbia's sins. But only through professional community planning can the chaos of the country's growth be turned into order. Concern with the total community is a heartening sign of sanity, order, rationality and realism in the American approach to the problem of urban expansion. There may still be hope for the suburban dream.