

Commentary

*With so much attention focused on planning for the "new South," the sense of a historical perspective is often lost. Carolina Planning is grateful to two of our readers for bringing the following article by Lewis Mumford to our attention, suggesting that after forty years it "may still be worth reading." Mumford, best known for his pioneering works such as *The Culture of Cities* (1938), wrote "A Thought for the Growing South" in 1949 after spending a year teaching in North Carolina universities. The article was commissioned by George Myers Stephens, publisher of *The Southern Packet* (who was also the father of two graduates of the Department of City and Regional Planning at UNC-Chapel Hill).*

We reprint the article here with great pleasure, along with commentary by DCRP professor David R. Godschalk, who explores the relevance of Mumford's thoughts to the state of the "growing South" of today. We hope that renewed examination of this piece will be thought-provoking to current planning students and practitioners, now in a position to guide the course of development in our region.

Carolina Planning welcomes suggestions of noteworthy articles by "planning legends" for future republication. -- EDS.

Comment by David R. Godschalk

Forty years ago, the great regional planning advocate, Lewis Mumford, advised North Carolina and the South on how to manage future growth. From his vantage point as a visiting lecturer at the UNC-Chapel Hill Department of City and Regional Planning, the North Carolina State University School of Design, and Women's College at Greensboro, he advocated an urban design strategy based on decentralizing cities and keeping them small, uncongested and in contact with nature. It is interesting to note how his advice, published as "A Thought for the Growing South" in *The Southern Packet*, has been heeded.

Fearing that the University of North Carolina might become "another metropolitan study-factory, with fifteen or twenty thousand students," Mumford urged that a multi-campus state university system be developed to accommodate the growth in student population. Although the Chapel Hill campus now has over twenty thousand students, the state has followed Mumford's "planned decentralization" notion by creating a sixteen campus system which avoids the giantism of a University of Michigan, with its student population of some fifty thousand. And while the UNC-CH campus has not escaped congestion and the loss of open spaces, it has managed to preserve many of its beautiful older buildings and quadrangles.

Mumford also urged that garden cities be built, based on the "organic limitations" of growth. Each would be a balanced, self-contained community of limited size, surrounded by a permanent belt of rural land. When the city reached its population limit, another new town would be started with the same balanced, self-contained pattern. Although their ultimate growth will be larger than the ideal population of thirty thousand postulated by Mumford, the towns of Chapel Hill and Carrboro, together with Orange County, have in fact surrounded themselves with a low-density rural buffer which defines the edge of future urban development. It will be interesting to observe whether future leaders are able to hold this line.

The Research Triangle region also is seeking ways to follow Mumford's principle of an uncongested balance between industry and agriculture, trying to preserve the neighborliness and informality of the South while pursuing a high-tech future. Whether the region can pull this off is still open to question. Mumford would be proud of our efforts to build the largely green Research Triangle Park employment center, create a regional open space network, protect our water supply watersheds, and intelligently guide our region's growth. He would certainly urge us to do even more to create a regional transit system and to curb the overzealous development which threatens to blend our individual cities into a single sheet of urban area. The 1988 World Class Region conference was one effort to respond to Mumford's challenge to provide the "social vision and the civic courage" to match our great natural resources.

In short, Mumford emerges as a wise counselor, a prophet with honor. His advice is still fresh today. I wonder how much of the advice of today's urbanists will be able to withstand a similar assessment forty years from now.

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A Thought for a Growing South

By LEWIS MUMFORD



LEWIS MUMFORD, *writer and professor of the Humanities, has been working with southern students this year in the fields of architecture, city and regional planning, and art. As visiting lecturer at the North Carolina State College School of Design, at the Department of City and Regional Planning at Chapel Hill and at Woman's College of the State University at Greensboro he has had opportunity to add to his general knowledge of the South through observation of community growth in North Carolina.*

Though he uses this state as his example, he points out that most of the South can benefit from similar conditions in planning for the future.

His current writings appear in the Saturday Review of Literature and the New Yorker. His interest in higher education brought him membership on the Commission on Teacher Education of The American Council on Education.

THE people of North Carolina are justly proud of their many natural resources, spread out in great diversity, from seashore to upland. But one of their most important assets they seem to have overlooked: their present pattern of population distribution.

Almost alone among the industrial areas of the nation, North Carolina is still a state in which most of its population is either rural or living in cities of less than a hundred thousand. In other words, industry and agriculture are still in balance here. Whether North Carolina will maintain this balance does not depend upon uncontrollable forces of nature: it depends upon whether people understand the advantages of such a population pattern and whether the state uses its powers to maintain it.

(What applies to North Carolina applies likewise, of course, to a great part

of the South. I have used North Carolina as an example because it is that part of the south with which I have had the greatest first-hand contact (In this article the terms "South" and "North Carolina" are mostly interchangeable).

Thanks to Dr. Howard Odum and his fellow workers, Chapel Hill and the University are the home of modern regionalism in America. But if North Carolina continues for very long to follow the path of least resistance, as it is now doing, it will commit the same mistakes that have been made in most other parts of the country. In that case the cities of North Carolina will lose their regional characteristics, instead of developing them further, and will take on the worst features of metropolitan areas everywhere, with blight and bankruptcy as their final portion. In fifty years, if North Carolina does not plan to maintain its present decentralized pattern, Charlotte, Raleigh, and High Point will be indistinguishable from Detroit; and the surrounding countryside will become merely a real estate speculators' annex to the growing metropolis.

Following the same pattern of uncontrolled growth and expansion, Chapel Hill will be another metropolitan study factory, with fifteen or twenty thousand students; its campus overcrowded, its old buildings either destroyed or reduced to insignificance, its whole educational procedure over-organized, over-routinized, over-institutionalized by the mere fact of congestion.

Under such conditions, the South will be wealthier in all the things that money can buy and poorer in all the things that are beyond price or purchase: neighborly association, friendly intercourse, home life, intimate contact with nature, the spiritual values that cannot be mechanized, standardized, or wholly institutionalized. You can already read what will happen in the future to the state at large if you look at the editorial pages of your newspapers: they are filled with syndicated features: mouldy crumbs of gossip dropping from the dinner tables of New York and Washington.

With North Carolina's steady industrialization, the forces that are now at work will produce congested cities and a sickly, bleached out kind of life, imitating the fashionable patterns of New York and Chicago, but incapable of producing anything in its own right worthy of being exported from the region and universalized. Yet the problem of transforming the current pattern of industrialization is not beyond the ability of man to solve. Most of the measures that must be taken in the South may be of a positive rather than a remedial nature: they are matters of preserving a balance that still exists, rather than of re-establishing a balance that has been almost utterly destroyed. If you value the life of the small town, with its emphasis on family, with its nearness to the open country, with its social life centered primarily in the school and the church, with factory workers who will tend their gardens and neighboring farm workers who are still available for jobs in factories--if you value

these things, you can now take steps to preserve them. And if you look forward to a continued development which will bring North Carolina the best that the world now offers by way of music, painting, sculpture, drama, enabling it to be a creator instead of a mere consumer of the arts, you can bring all this about without accepting also the over-crowding, the waste and fatigue of unnecessary travel, which are the penalties for metropolitan development.

But do not mistake the problem. Your existing small towns, with occasional happy exceptions, are not ideal, either in outline or content; your bigger cities too, need a good deal of doing over in order to make them serve public needs--for open spaces, greenbelts, playgrounds, school and community centers--that were not recognized even half a century ago. If you face these deficiencies now and frame a public policy of guided urban growth for each state as a whole, the cities of the South may show as many advances as the Tennessee Valley does in power development and flood control. For the decentralization of cities *is* flood control--the flood control of population.

But the time for a decision is now at hand. During the next generation, possibly during the next decade, the citizens of North Carolina will make commitments that will profoundly affect the future of their land and their people. And if they fail to grasp the problem and let the current notions of "profit, prestige and power" continue to dominate, then their inaction will in itself constitute a decision, and by that fact they will have battered their fine birthright for a mess of metropolitan pottage. But the advantage of the present distribution of population, which is the result of historic accidents, entirely unplanned, cannot be maintained without bold intervention and positive action on the part of the state, in cooperation with the leaders of finance, industry and business. To make this decision intelligently, you must understand the lesson first taught half a century ago by Ebenezer Howard: the lesson of guided growth. Though he applied that lesson first of all to the growth of cities, it applies equally to any other kind of human organization, to a factory, an office, a hospital or a college.

Howard observed that the over-growth of cities was not the blind result of natural forces; it was due to the purposes and intentions of men, seeking a cheaper source of labor, high land values, a large market to dispose of their goods, and many other factors. But in the course of promoting such growth in the nineteenth century the most successful cities over-reached themselves; they grew so big that they cut themselves off from the real sources of life and became disorderly, lopsided environments, with insufficient parks, playgrounds and private gardens, with expensive and time-wasting transportation systems that took people daily from congested homes where they had rather not live to equally dismal factories and offices where they had rather not work. The bigger such cities grew, the more money they were compelled to spend on remedies for their own over-expan-

sion and congestion, and the less they had available for health, recreation, education and culture. Originally the open country, through the presence of nature and the maintenance of traditional ways of life, had many precious elements the big city lacked; but the city took away ever growing numbers of people from the country. Those who remained suffered often from remoteness and loneliness, from impoverishment and the lack of social contacts.

Howard concluded that neither the overcrowded city nor the depopulated countryside were satisfactory human environments. He proposed to remarry the town and country by creating a new type of community, which he called a garden city, to combine the advantages of both and evade their penalties and defects. Howard believed that almost all the advantages for daily living in cities could be achieved in a balanced self-contained community of some thirty thousand people, surrounded by a permanent belt of rural land, capable of holding another two thousand. The emphasis in this notion falls on the words "balanced" and "self-contained." By a balanced community, Howard meant not a suburb or a fractional part of a city, however generous its open spaces, but a complete urban community in which the work places would be within walking distance of the homes. To be self-contained, such a community must be limited in area, in population and in density. When the time came to accommodate more people, as a result of the natural growth of population or the expansion of industry, one must not keep on adding automatically to the facilities of the old centers: one must create new centers, also in balance, with an eventual duplication of the facilities for business, industry, education and social life generally. Balanced development and guided growth must go hand in hand. With more of such cities in existence the countryside would profit too: more local consumers for fruit, vegetables, wood, services and a wider range of seasonal industrial jobs.

This is not the place to describe the extraordinary influence of Howard's idea on town planners all over the world, nor his final triumph, after founding two experimental towns in England, in the British New Towns Bill of 1946, which provided for the building of a series of new towns, limited to sixty thousand population, as a means of opening up the overpopulated districts of London and controlling future growth.

What is even more important, Howard called attention to a factor completely overlooked in the general expansion of industrial and municipal facilities in the nineteenth century: the organic limitations of growth. With all living organisms there is a definite form of growth; below that limit we produce dwarfs, above that limit giants, both penalized by this failure to keep to the norm. Now cities are not organisms but human organizations; yet they share in some degree this special limitation. Historically, the over-expansion of cities is associated with the disruption and disintegration of civilizations. The old American notion,

"the bigger the better", has no foundation in fact.

If the notion of controlled and limited urban growth were accepted in the South, if the advantages of the small city were fully realized, the appropriate political and economic agencies for promoting this kind of growth could be devised: agencies which would partly assist in the re-planning of the existing centers, partly in the development of new centers of limited population and balanced facilities, partly in the unification of groups of related cities that would have the benefits of centralized effort for common purposes without the penalties of congestion. It would be premature to outline such policies and programs, though it is important to understand their feasibility. At this time it is wiser to stress how the principle of controlled growth would apply to other institutions as well. Let us take, for example the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The campus of the State University at Chapel Hill is one of the most beautiful in the whole country. During the last fifteen years an enormous growth has taken place there: more students, I have been told, were graduated since 1935 than during the whole of the institution's previous existence. Scarcely a patch of land on the campus has not been built over or has not been assigned to a structure soon to be built. It has reached its natural limits of development with its present student population; and in certain buildings, like the library [Wilson Library -- EDS.], inept planning and design have produced a structure entirely out of scale with the rest of the campus. At this point comes a choice. If the university continues its automatic expansion at Chapel Hill, all that now makes the campus so admirable will, in the course of the next thirty years, be over-built and destroyed--destroyed by people who piously respect the past, but have not yet learned the only terms on which its traditional virtues may be preserved.

But another path of development is possible: not continued agglomeration but planned decentralization. To preserve Chapel Hill there is no need to limit the number of students given a higher education by the state. What is needed is to follow Ebenezer Howard's principle, the principle followed by nature in the overcrowded bee-hive: and that is to hive off and start a new part of the University, indeed a series of new parts, each destined in the end to become as big as Chapel Hill now is. In other words, instead of trying to double the present student population at Chapel Hill, two centers instead of one should be built; instead of tripling it, three centers instead of one--and so on. One of these new centers might be placed in the Asheville area, another in the Winston-Salem area, perhaps a third in the Charlotte area. The precedent for this already exists: for the University of North Carolina is not one institution but three, and Raleigh and Greensboro--not to mention the state teachers' colleges--share part of the population that might otherwise unwisely have been concentrated at Chapel Hill. By taking care of its natural growth in this fashion,

North Carolina would not merely conserve one of its most valuable treasures, Chapel Hill itself, but add considerably to the educational and cultural advantages of other parts of the state. Particularly in adult education, the teachers in decentralized institutions, no longer obliged to travel long distances from Chapel Hill, would have a much closer relation to the people they serve.

In short, with city buildings and in institutional development, congestion brings the penalty of disorganization, inefficiency and lapse of function. By the same token, organization and economy demand a deliberate policy of decentralization. The old-fashioned method of funneling people into centers that become ever more congested and ever more expensive to run and ever more unsatisfactory in their human and social relationships, need not be copied by the State of North Carolina. All its industries, textiles, ceramics, furniture, cigarettes, may greatly increase and many new industries be added, without breaking up its present population pattern--provided its leaders under-

stand how valuable that pattern is and how much the whole community has to gain by maintaining and perfecting it.

The new method of growth is to set a limit to automatic growth and to take care of fresh growth by building new centers, also limited in size and area and density. If the new method is chosen, all that is good in the traditional agricultural folkways can be maintained in the neighborhood units of the new centers.

Yes, and much more can be added, provided the citizens of the state have the social vision and the civic courage to match their great natural resources. To accomplish all these valuable social results under the democratic process will, plainly, require political skill of a high order, coupled with an ant-like patience and persistence in getting around obstacles. But if I can judge at all from the southern students I have been teaching this year, these qualities are already at hand, waiting for the leadership that will give them such a worthy goal.