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# HISTORIC PATTERNS IN URBAN ESTHETICS AND URBAN RECONSTRUCTION

*By Ibsen Nelsen\**

## INTRODUCTION

Despite President Nixon's recent assurances that the crisis of our cities has passed, few urbanites in America have derived much comfort from his remarks. City dwellers in fact have little confidence that our cities are what they could be or that the present disastrous urban conditions will improve in the foreseeable future. In fact, the President's remarks could well symbolize in our political leadership the lack of cultural values necessary for the transformation of our cities into attractive living environments.

The decline in physical and visual quality is pronounced in most American cities, and the blunt truth of the matter is that, with rare exceptions, ugliness and lack of amenity are our cities' central characteristics.<sup>1</sup> While the problems of economic and social inequality, poverty, crime, poor schools, inadequate municipal services, economic depression, and inadequate transportation remain, it is not likely that the central city will provide an attractive living environment for most Americans. Essential to the improvement of the current situation is a vision of what the physical environment of the city can and should be.

The purpose of this brief article is not to minimize the problems but rather to propose an approach to improving the quality of life in the city through the use of historically successful urban forms in building new communities within existing cities. I will use Seattle as an example in the discussion.

## THE FLIGHT OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

Seattle with its splendid setting, its hills and water, its location in a countryside of endless scenic virtues, has much to recommend it over many other major cities in America. However, the lack of

amenity in the man-made cityscape is as pronounced as it is in most other American cities; and the problems of Seattle, while differing somewhat from those of America's other major cities, are in essence symptomatic. In the decade of the 1960's, while the State of Washington increased in population by 20%, Seattle's population declined 6%, an average of 3,000 persons per year. The suburbs, in contrast, have burgeoned in size, with most of the increase comprised of the white middle class. The problem involved, the loss from the inner city of a large percentage of the middle class, is staggering in its economic effect alone. The loss of consumer purchasing power and the decrease in the tax base have major impacts on the economic health of the city. These statistics in Seattle go a long way to explain the empty streets at night and the disappearance of variety, life and urbanity. Further, the enormous problems created by the floods of commuter automobiles which enter each day are direct results of the flight of the middle class. The decreasing central city population has resulted in an urban population density of only nine persons per acre, which causes great difficulty in maintaining urban mass transit. Decreasing urban density also helps explain the lack of an effective police presence, as patrolling such areas is impractical except in patrol cars. This in turn limits police response to crimes such as assaults to an after-the-fact presence instead of the before-the-fact preventive presence possible with foot patrols.

#### THE MYTH OF LOW DENSITY AS AN URBAN IDEAL

While decline in population and the increasing absence of the middle class from the inner cities is a fundamental problem, low density, contrary to popular dogma, is another. In fact, urban sprawl and low density is the basic problem obstructing the reconstruction of Seattle.

As environmentalists have made more people aware of the value of open countryside, and of the need to protect undeveloped land from the abuses of developers, new land use legislation and regulations have come into effect. An example of comprehensive land use legislation, Washington State's Shorelines Management Act of 1971,<sup>2</sup> will regulate all land fronting on the ocean, bays, lakes, and rivers. The Act in general is excellent, and its potential benefit could be great. Whether its potential will be realized, however, remains to be seen, and depends entirely on the quality of planning and type of regulations promulgated under the Act.

There are signs emerging already that suggest that altogether constructive solutions may not be forthcoming. The basic problem stems from the planners' conception, which is probably wrong, of a separate house on a separate plot of land for each family. We hear now the term "strict controls" applied to planning in regulated areas. "Strict controls" means more open space on each individual building site, be it for a home, office building, apartment house, or other commercial structure. Not only is this wrong, not only will it not protect the land, it will in fact have the opposite effect. These "strict controls" will guarantee lower densities and further dispersion of habitations, increase dependency on the automobile, require more paving, destroy more trees and natural landscape, and contribute further to the decline in quality of all communities. There is need for a policy of greater concentration of buildings, a resulting conservation of meaningful open space, and a concentration of people which can create a sense of community and provide a framework for urban mass transit to replace the present dependence on the automobile.

#### HISTORICALLY SUCCESSFUL URBAN FORMS

Proper identification of the basic problems is necessary. Equally necessary is a vision of the kinds of communities and cities that are possible. A sensible, inspired restructuring of our cities can be achieved if urban reconstruction programs are devised to produce a genuine urban amenity. The use of historically successful urban forms offers the best method of reaching these goals.

Changes in our cities occur and will continue to occur incrementally. As physical change in the cityscape is thus generally slow and piecemeal, and as unsuccessful structures and forms remain to plague us for decades or even centuries, experimentation is often not practical. Rather, the proven solutions of past urban forms should be adopted and adapted to present needs.

There is an urgency to this task, which becomes clearer as more people realize the failure of post-World War II urban design and city planning in America. While technology and design inventiveness have occasionally produced new urban forms of limited success, the overall record indicates a lack of ability to design and produce modern, liveable cities. It is suggested that the remedy for this failure lies in the reapplication of such successful urban forms as the inner block park or courtyard, the definition of streets by the use of continuity in low rise buildings and row houses, the public

square, the relationship of continuous housing to public parks, and the restoration of a proper balance in urban streets between pedestrians and vehicles.

First a word about low rise buildings and density. One of our popular myths is that the economic use of urban land, economy of construction, and economics of development dictate high-rise buildings in the central city.<sup>3</sup> The alleged solution, widespread in its application, involves tall buildings set apart from each other to create "open-space"; experience has indicated that this solution is fallacious. Continuous, low-rise buildings around the margin of a block will produce economical building construction, population density as high as is desirable, and an inner block park or courtyard which is far more useful and meaningful as open space than the left over space between isolated, disconnected buildings. London until 1965 had almost no buildings over six stories, and achieved as high a population density as might be considered workable. Amsterdam is characterized not only by its canals, but also by its inner block parks. Camillo Sitte, architect of Vienna's Ringstrasse plan, wrote a long time ago in *CITY BUILDING IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTISTIC PRINCIPLES*<sup>4</sup> of the importance of the inner block park and of the inner block set back line.

For example, near Hyde Park in London, there is a small inner block park called St. George's Hanover Square Gardens. This splendid green oasis in a great city is a refuge from the street and an amenity of immeasurable value to the community surrounding it. The community itself demonstrates how an historically viable urban configuration can serve as model for modern use.

The inner block garden or park is formed and defined by the continuous street frontage buildings which are also aligned on the inner block set back line. A mixed usage of street front shops, continuous at ground level, with second floor offices, together with apartments above facing both the street and the garden, establishes a humane, urban social pattern. One finds schools cheek by jowl with bars, post offices, cafes, churches, restaurants, hardware stores, delicatessens, and grocers. All that is needed by the community is near at hand in buildings of limited height. In such a configuration, street activity enhances urbanity and discourages crime. In such an area it is feasible to have policemen on foot. Safety is engendered by presence, rather than by after-the-fact response. An important element of the success of the inner block park is the limited number of entries to the park and the ability to close these entries at night.

Another fundamental, and successful, historic principal is the use of the row house to define the continuity and architecture of the street. The row house is a humanely scaled form, and it is especially sensible when related to a park or square. The use of continuous houses or buildings to define humanely scaled squares, such as the town greens of our older towns in America or the more densely built up squares of the West End of London, produces viable patterns that can be used for new community construction in our present towns and cities.

#### CONCLUSION

We cannot rebuild American towns and cities without a comprehensive vision of what they should be. Zoning ordinances are of very limited value, and yet they are the only land use regulations guiding most urban construction in America today. If there is any underlying vision in America employed as a basis for urban zoning, it is the vague notion that setting buildings apart from each other and back from the street is desirable. A secondary, equally erroneous vision involves maximizing the on-site parking facilities. Height restrictions are rare, and usually only conform to what is economical to the private developer when required set backs and land values are considered.

But planning based merely on this sort of zoning ordinance has not produced, and never will produce, cityscapes better than those we have now. What is needed is a new esthetic vision of what cities may be, and clear, long range plans to produce reality from this vision.



#### FOOTNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See generally, J. Jacobs, *THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES* (New York: Random House, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Code of Wash. Ann. §90.58.010 *et seq.* (1972).

<sup>3</sup> Like most myths, this one may be partially true. When only currently assigned market costs to the private developer and builder are considered, it may be economical to build high-rise structures. However, many diseconomies may result for the larger community: loss of tax revenue because of tax incentives granted to spur development,

loss of sunlight, human scale, and other public amenities, and increased demand on urban public services relative to any subsequent increase in tax revenues are all examples of common diseconomies borne by the community in the name of private profit for individual developers and builders.

There is as well a failure to understand how density can be achieved by use of low buildings. Three story buildings around the perimeter of an average urban block will equal an eleven story building built, alternatively, in its center.

<sup>4</sup> C. Cittle, *CITY PLANNING IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTISTIC PRINCIPLES* (New York: Random House, 1965).