

## ON TOWN PLANNING — 1919

Town planning is the outcome of a belief in a fundamental principle which is false. The principle is collectivism. The drilling and controlling of the multitude—the formalism of Prussian militarism. The crushing of individual liberty, and the moulding of the mass into cast-iron conceptions and conventions that petrify progress. The making of towns in moments of time, the sudden creations of imaginative minds, are indeed fascinating subjects for the stage. We all enjoy fairy tales, and fiction is a perpetual charm; our newspapers are full of it. We delight to picture how other people should behave, and we build castles in the air that none can live in. We feed our creative fancy without restraint, and the more superficial we are the more are we satisfied. Little wonder that the first awakening of a materialistic age should find expression in town planning, and in the shutting of the eyes to the prosaic necessities of individual existence.

We have been advancing rapidly for the last hundred years in the sciences, and in all that concerns man's material well-being. And his poor spirit has been starved, his imagination atrophied. Nothing seemed to him true but that which you could prove by demonstration. We have shut our eyes so long to the spiritual side of our natures that now, as Novalis said, "We are near awakening when we dream that we dream." We dream of great vistas and colonnades, and vast rows of things. Of human beings moving in unison and living in ordered rotation. The throb of the machine has taken the place of the throb of the human heart.

One noticeable feature of human nature still persists, and that is the hatred aroused by all forms of heresy. The unconventional is suspected, if not positively resented. As long as we conform to the recognized pattern we are welcome, but woe betide the eccentric and the heterodox.

Town planning follows the same instinct—conformity is its very essence. Collectivism is its creed. It seems fatally easy to generalize and fasten on general likeness. And so much more easy than to perceive differences. Symmetrical arrangement is more ready to the hand of the unskilled than the harmonious arrangement of differences and unlikeness.



The Dutch town of slow growth surely presents many examples of individual expression and personal needs of varying quality and degree. An ever-varying personal note produces the richest interest and charm. Not only do we feel the presence of distinct persons of distinguished personality, but our interest is greatly sustained by the changes brought about by time. As we pass along the streets, history is revealed and we are charmed by the evidences of changing habits, customs, and feelings of a natural growth. What a contrast such a street is to one of the Gower Street type!—all built at one period, and uttering the same monotonous moan. No suggestion of a life of movement, but one note only of a class distinct and unvaried. One can see the silk-hatted, frock-coated City man coming out punctually, day after day, year in and year out.

Turn now to the present day and observe the change; see how the mischief of standardizing houses is illustrated. The original use for which such houses were planned has ceased to exist; and in changing the character of the occupants, blinds, curtains, brass plates, and advertisements have transfigured the old tidy order of things. The effect is chaotic. It cannot be wise to assume that any large bodies of men will for many generations congregate in communistic fashion as in the garden suburbs.

Collective energy is subject to fashion; it grows on established conventions and prejudices. Machine-like regularity and certainty are its aims. But in nature, what is more true than that she never repeats herself? No two leaves on any tree are alike. Variety is nature's law. Oh that we could feel more respect for nature's law!—then what lovely wisdom might we learn! Thank heaven men are not all alike; were they alike there could be no communion between us and no love. Why then force us into symmetrical streets and houses, or preconceived types of houses for supposed typical needs? Why make us all behave alike, when by our very natures we are forced to feel differently?

It is but natural that many will jeer at the statement that the question of town planning is a moral as well as a practical one. The idea that human intelligence must be preserved in water-tight compartments is mischievous in the extreme. What we love we imitate, and we love the line of least resistance. We love to contemplate rules and regulations, and flow with the great river of officialdom. But were we left without control to work out our own salvation, the native love in us would still lead us to imitate what



we thought best. We should still try to perpetuate all that we thought good. There would not be that anarchy and brutality that so many fear. Real freedom makes men more careful because more responsible. Let every town dweller make his own dwelling and work-place as far as possible, and our towns would be as gold, beautifully human and lovely to behold.

"Britons never, never shall be slaves!" Is it not the most natural cry of this northern race? Are we not the pioneers of freedom? The high priests of free thought? Each man must think for himself, or perish. And does not this instinct lead us naturally to seek the verities of real life? It makes us practical. We are, by it, driven to find out what are real fundamentals. Individualism is the strengthening of the unit for the ultimate salvation of the aggregate. Beware then, be on your guard lest town-planning authorities clip your wings, and cause you to sink to the bowels of the earth, rather than soar with the eagle to ideals nearer heaven.

We are befogged by the exuberance of our own verbosity. But what we really wish at heart is to get at the verities that shall lead to practical results. To learn what forces are permanent and potent, and must be obeyed. What, in fact, are the conditions which govern our efforts to make the world better. No superficial impression will help us. We must get to basic principles, and distinguish between invariable law and passing phases. Moods and movements governed by fancy and fashion will only make us less stable and less sure.

The government of communities must of course depend very largely on collective energy. Such matters as the making of roads and open spaces, drainage, water supply, and lighting. All of which are matters of common moment and general concern. Such universal necessities have their known characters and requirements, common to all, and in no sense variable like the modes of our domestic habits. Though we must not forget our gratitude is due to individual action and not corporate action that London is so rich in beautiful squares.

It is difficult to draw any hard and fast line determining the spheres of liberty and control. The advocates of Collectivism and Government Control start with the assumption that man is bound to go wrong if left to his own devices. And upon this evil premise all their systems are based; and the great army of officials with their acres of blue books and bylaws is bred and born, inevitably producing anarchy or rebellion.



We have never tried to start on the hypothesis that men will more often go right than wrong if left alone. We need to believe that more good is got out of trusting people than mistrusting them. Were such a principle to be tried, who knows how unselfishness would increase and right feeling grow?

The recognition of our own rights must remind us of the rights of others. Communities could grow up and live and work together in harmony without the shepherding of a grandmotherly Government. Building lines and strait-jackets belong to savage conditions. The theorist that will not allow anyone to hang his upper story beyond the face of the lower will yet allow the varying levels in the public way that are veritable death-traps to the feeble and blind. The importance or unimportance of details of this nature is endlessly debatable, and for that reason should be left to individual intelligence. Why should brass buttons and gold braid be regarded as a guarantee of special knowledge or wisdom? The local tradesman who assists in framing rules by which our towns are to be planned and regulated may or may not be wise. We may be more or less deluded than he. Possibly our theories have no more evidence of wisdom than his; therefore leave us free to work out our own salvation, to suffer for our own faults and mistakes. It is fear of the imaginary consequences that makes men shy to trust in individual judgment. We have more confidence in a sausage machine! Fear is our bitterest foe.

Of course, it is quite true others must suffer for our mistakes. But it is better for all that we should feel the moral responsibility ourselves, than that we should excuse ourselves by sheltering behind the rules and regulations of public bodies.

The height of our buildings is a matter that would readily right itself. It is not fair to assume that numbers would tower into the sky to the detriment of the community at large. No one would deliberately endanger himself or his neighbour. We have liberty enough already to make the world more ugly; why add to our evil propensity by forcing us to ugliness by Act of Parliament? And this we affirm is what is being done now.

Nothing but individual love of beauty, truth, and Providence will ever make the world more comely. No State aid or State control can do it. It depends absolutely on individual effort. Of course few will admit it. So-called improvements made by town-governing bodies will at once be cited in refutation of the statement. And then who is to judge? This is a matter of belief and a sincere con-



viction of the writer, no less true to him because unprovable.

This laying down of the law and endeavour to state fundamental principles is open to us all, and carries no authority. It is claimed as a right and a privilege, if not a duty, for every man to think for himself. And only in so far as we can help each other to clearer thought, and to find out what are and what are not fundamental principles, can we release ourselves from the tyranny of corporate control. Let those who are for and those against try to see each other's facts as well as fancies, and in time we may get to more understanding. The feeling of antagonism must warp the judgment. Our hatred of miles of formal building striking the same note, or the colony of flanneled faddists all prying into each other's gardens, the Government offices besmeared with academic sculpture and rows of shops for different trades, all making the same ugly faces at us—all these things must tend to make us feel unkindly against town planning. And justice leaves us stranded on our own pet animosities. Lest this fusillade against town planning should give the false impression that we see no good in it at all, we must here graciously acknowledge that where new districts are to be developed and old ones improved, the town-planner can do great good. He can lay out roads and direct all matters of common concern, and help individuals to preserve their own individuality by recognizing other people's rights. Keep us, we pray, from interfering with other people's rightful liberty. We all need to be freed from our fears, for fear is the most common check on our trust in our fellow-men. Fear of man's wickedness and weakness makes him feeble and false. It is a bad influence on both parties.

It is the moral responsibility of individual action that we need to respect and preserve, and the power without responsibility following collective control which we need to prevent.

This article was scanned from  
David Gebhard,  
Charles F. A. Voysey Architect,  
Los Angeles, 1975, pp. 77-81.