
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE SECOND COMING OF THE AMERICAN SMALL TOWN

City and town planning is not a profession that many parents would encourage their children to enter. Especially since the disillusionments of the 1960s, the profession has fallen into popular and intellectual disfavor. One recent history, Diane Ghirardo's **Building New Communities: New Deal America and Fascist Italy** (Princeton, 1989), even suggests that the intentions of New Deal town builders were little different from those of their fascist counterparts.

In **Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century** (Basil Blackwell, 1988), Berkeley's Peter Hall offers a more generous yet still discouraging summary of the influence of the great modern planners, from Ebenezer Howard in the last century to Clarence Stein in this one:

Most of them were visionaries, but [many of] their visions long lay fallow, because the time was not ripe. The visions themselves were often utopian, even millenarian: they resembled nothing so much as secular versions of the 17th-century Puritans' Celestial City set on Mount Zion When at last the visions were discovered and resuscitated, their implementation came often in very different places, in very different circumstances, and often through very different mechanisms, from those their inventors had originally envisaged It is small wonder that the results were often bizarre, sometimes catastrophic.

Today, town planning seems positively un-American to many, even though history shows that Americans have had long experience with it. That history is explored in **Town Planning in Frontier America** (1965, reissued by Univ. of Mo., 1980) by John Reps, a Cornell architect. George Washington, after all, helped survey the grid street system of Alexandria, Virginia, in 1749 and was the prime mover behind the new national capital. Washington, D.C., designed by Pierre L'Enfant, was unusual in that it departed in various ways from the utilitarian grid that

was to prevail through much of American history. One 19th-century European writer, though finding much to commend in the "perfect regularity" of the ubiquitous grid, nevertheless concluded that the Americans had made a fetish of it, sacrificing "beauty to prejudice."

The grid, like virtually all other design ideas of the time, was a purely European import. The first major American contribution to city design came with the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Architects Daniel Burnham and Charles F. McKim and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted married Beaux Arts architecture to the monumental design principles of Georges-Eugène Haussmann, who had laid out the grand boulevards of Paris in the mid-19th century. Their design expressed in its sweeping power America's arrival on the world stage—America's imperialism, many critics would say—yet also made a grab for Old World respectability through the architectural classicism of its civic buildings. The episode is recalled by Mario Manieri-Elia in **The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal** (MIT, 1979).

The Exposition gave birth to the City Beautiful movement, which stressed the creation of boulevards, public spaces, and civic buildings. Burnham, propelled to national prominence by the success of the Exposition, chaired a federal commission in 1901 that oversaw the restoration of L'Enfant's plan for Washington. Grand schemes for the revamping of Chicago and San Francisco followed, but little came of them, thanks in part to the sense of financial reality bred by the panic of 1907. The movement also had more profound difficulties. The City Beautiful was a place of *public* spaces; it could accommodate neither the automobile nor the skyscrapers made possible by, among other things, the invention of the elevator. Still, the movement left a legacy of parks and regal civic structures.

Even these were not always appreciated. In **Sticks and Stones** (1924), Lewis Mumford at-

tacked the whole movement, contrasting the "sedulously classic" new Lincoln Memorial of Burnham's Washington with "the America that Lincoln was bred in, the homespun and humane and humorous America that he wished to preserve."

Mumford represents a more powerful current of thought in American planning, one that traces its origins to England's Ebenezer Howard. Reacting to the squalor of the industrial cities, Howard sketched in **Garden Cities of Tomorrow** (1902) a compelling vision of self-sufficient new towns scattered across the countryside. His Garden City Association sponsored the construction of the first Garden City in Letchworth, England, and spread his ideas to the Continent and across the Atlantic. (One of Letchworth's designers was Raymond Unwin, whose 1909 book, **Town Planning in Practice**, is now enjoying a revival.)

In the United States, writes Jonathan Barnett in **The Elusive City: Five Centuries of Design, Ambition and Miscalculation** (Harper, 1986), the Garden City idea influenced a number of planners, including Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. American versions of the Garden City include Lake Forest, Illinois (1916) and a number of company towns, such as Kohler, Wisconsin (1913). Among the innovations of the era was the curving "bucolic" street. Stein later wrote in **Toward New Towns for America** (1957) that the planner must think of himself as creating "a theater for the good life." The most ambitious efforts to fulfill the Garden City ideal were in Radburn, New Jersey, which foundered during the Great Depression, and in the town-building program of the New Deal's Resettlement Administration, which was killed by Congress.

All of these Garden Cities failed in many ways to live up to the ideal—none remained self-sufficient, for example—and for many reasons. But the coming of the auto must top any list of explanations.

Because they promoted the idea of decentralization, the Garden City advocates are often blamed for paving the way for the dominion of

the auto and the creation of suburban sprawl. In **The Death and Life of Great American Cities** (1961), Jane Jacobs lumped them together with the imperious modernists inspired by the Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier, who championed a Radiant City of monumental towers strung along superhighways. But historians tell somewhat different stories.

In **Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States** (Oxford, 1985), widely regarded as the definitive work on its subject, Kenneth T. Jackson argues that the flight to suburbia began before there was any thought of a Garden City. (Brooklyn Heights, New York, linked to Manhattan by a ferry in 1814, was the first suburb, he says.) It was motivated by a peculiarly American desire among this country's rich to separate themselves from the rest of society. Robert Fishman takes issue with Jackson in **Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia** (Basic, 1987), arguing that the exodus began somewhat later, inspired by Victorian ideas about home and family that made it seem imperative to flee urban vices.

In any event, there is general agreement that the suburban future was not sealed until after World War II, when the federal government built the interstate highway system and provided low-interest mortgages for new homes but nothing for the renovation of city dwellings.

Where are we now, nearly half a century later? Beyond central cities, beyond suburbs, and largely beyond planning, argues Joel Garreau in **Edge City: Life on the New Frontier** (Doubleday, 1991). Along with Fishman (see "America's New City," *WQ*, Winter 1990), he believes that the suburb is being transformed into a new kind of city: unfamiliar, decentralized, and based on the auto, but a city nevertheless. The two part company over the issue of planning. Garreau regards the rebirth of planning as unlikely; Fishman sees it as essential. But they are united in their optimism about the possibilities of the new frontier that lies before us.

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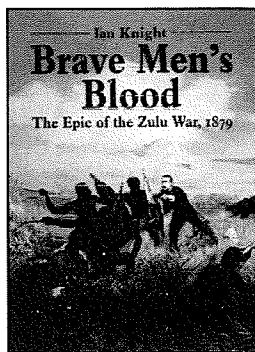
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