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Slum Dwellings Do Not Make a Slum

By NATHAN GLAZER

A NEW Department of Housing and Urban Development will soon be in existence. Ironically, it comes into being at a time, when our urban problems, we are all convinced, are very serious, but when their solutions are harder to discern than ever before.

About the problems there is relatively little argument. Our cities suffer from crime rates that are among the highest in the world. Our poor in many cities live in housing far below the minimum levels for health and amenity that our public bodies have set. Transportation, heavily dependent upon automobiles, flows fairly smoothly now because of our enormous investments in roads, but the projected increases in population and automobiles will soon bring unbearable congestion. Recreational areas are crowded and insufficient. Air and water become increasingly polluted. Urban education and welfare, despite their high cost and increasing Federal support, are considered by experts radically inadequate. Our cities are becoming increasingly occupied by Negroes, while the suburbs generally resist the attempts of Negro families to move into them. And our intellectuals find the great expansion and rebuilding of our cities that have taken place since World War II repellent on social and esthetic grounds, arguing that they have destroyed the advantages of city and country alike.

This is quite a bundle of urban problems: It mixes the social, the political, the physical, the financial and the esthetic, and it is perhaps understandable that we have no simple slate of solutions. Yet only a few years ago there did exist a rough consensus among the experts as to what we needed. The critics Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs both, to my mind, formed part of this consensus — which is why it was easy for intellectuals to respond positively to both. The consensus was that the city needed a certain degree of density and variety; the variety required was both physical (buildings of different kinds) and social—people of different kinds and functions of different kinds.

For both Mumford and Jacobs the image of the ideal city was really the same: the organic city, the European city, the medieval city. It would be beautiful in its slow accretion of different physical forms reflecting different needs and uses. It would have people of all ages and colors and classes. It would have workplaces and stores and public halls as well as residences, and all would have social as well as purely economic functions. It would have well-used little areas of green instead of large expanses of grass or concrete. Mumford disagreed with the densities Jacobs found necessary, and Jacobs found Mumford's new towns banal; but since Mumford wanted to build new towns, and Jacobs to preserve parts of old ones, there was no fatal conflict.

FROM this initial consensus on the organic city, certain other things followed. First, the emphasis on good public transportation. Automobiles need too much space to move and store and demand an urban pattern that is too spread out and anti-social. Second, the criticism of public housing for its concentration of the poor into enormous projects, its failure to integrate them into organic neighborhoods, and its massive and obtrusive physical form. Third, the criticism of "urban sprawl," the unplanned proliferation of housing developments and shopping-center complexes, which ate up the countryside and, on the other hand, did not produce a dense, organic, complex urban structure.

This was the central imagery. It had a number of implications. One was that physical form would have inevitable and major consequences for the social life of the city. In Mumford's organic new town, there are grandparents to baby-sit and help socialize children, places to work nearby where teen-agers can get to them, communal open spaces for play and informal education. In Jane Jacobs's inner city neighborhood, there are lively streets to occupy the young, there is social control by storekeepers and street-watchers. In both cases, one may expect, juvenile delinquency and crime are reduced.

A second implication was that the question of means — political and financial — while undoubtedly important, could be managed once there was a consensus as to what should be done. Mumford favored public means, Jacobs preferred private means guided by public decisions that offered it scope and yet channeled it into socially valuable actions (many small investments rather than a few large ones). The questions over which political scientists, elected officials and administrators agonized—the specific political structure that would produce the most efficiency in the city, the role of the planning agency, relations between the central city and the suburbs, the city and the states, the city and the Federal Government, the maintenance of the tax base — these were questions that played a relatively small role in the emergence of the rough consensus I have described.

Let no one underestimate the role of these ideas in shaping policy. Urban renewal is, among other things, a means of restoring an efficient density, a variety of use and an integrated social community to the central city. Among its main movers, after all, were planners and urban critics, as well as mayors and bankers. Its means, it turned out, were radically inadequate to achieve these ends on any large scale. The failure to match it with any large-scale program of low-cost housing turned it into a menace to the low-income population. The demands and requirements of private investors frustrated it in achieving social ends on a large scale. It was further frustrated, one may hazard, by the low state of the

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afts of architecture and physical planning in this country in the fifties. Note that Rockefeller Center, which is in effect urban renewal (built in the thirties with one large-scale landowner and one large-scale investor, replacing the need of the power of eminent domain and government subsidy as a basis for large-scale redevelopment), delights all urban critics. The means that made it possible are now available to all cities; but success in using these means still demands skills in architecture, planning and social arrangement that cannot be written into law, or flower on the basis of a facilitating act.

URBAN renewal is under continuous revision. Public housing begins to show the effects of criticism, despite the massive inertia built up by an existing program. The new housing act will provide ways to house the poor in less segregated settings. Urban transportation is beginning to get Federal support, as is open land acquisition by cities. Finally, the Federal Government now has adopted the idea of planned new communities; twice, legislation to facilitate them with Federal grants and loans has been presented to Congress. It will certainly be presented again. Many of the reasons it is being presented are the same as the reasons why it has been proposed by planners and urban critics again and again: saving the countryside; an efficient use of land; communities limited in size and containing most of the needs for urban existence to provide a better basis for satisfying community life. And there is now a new argument for new towns, for it is hoped they will further integration, not only by containing housing for various income groups and races, but by drawing Negroes and poor from the cities, which contain increasing numbers of both.

But now let us look back at our urban problems, and let us look again at these means that are being shaped under the impact of the urban critics. To what extent are these means adequate solu- *(Continued on Page 57)*

tions to these problems? Certainly, each of these means, by itself, is of value—we shall all benefit from an improved system of urban renewal that facilitates a richer physical and social urban texture, a humanized public housing, the expansion of mass transportation, the preservation of open space, new towns.

NEVERTHELESS, three areas of weakness can be found in our present and projected programs, areas that to my mind will require considerable research and experimentation, and to which we must direct our attention seriously if we are to make really substantial improvements in our cities.

To begin with, we must root out of our thinking and our programs an assumption that lies deep in the heart of the urban criticism of Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs and their teachers and their followers: the assumption that the physical form of our communities has social consequences. This assumption has been most decisively challenged by the sociologist Herbert Gans. One may even detect this assumption in the conception of the new Department of Housing and Urban Development. Most of its specific functions will concern matters of physical construction, but we can be sure it will be expected to be more. Its Secretary will be expected to be an expert on urban problems in general. It will be expected that its work in housing, transportation, open space, new towns and urban renewal will produce not only new housing, transportation facilities, recreational facilities and the like, but also *better cities*—and by that we shall have in mind housing that is well maintained, transportation facilities that remain clean and safe, parks we can walk in at night.

All these things, of course, relate to the *social* fabric of a society, and that unfortunately is a more complex and mysterious matter than good construction or even good physical planning. Both Mumford and Jacobs—who are sociologists as well as planners—encouraged the hope that these things matter more in the achieving of a good city than unfortunately they do, even though both, as social philosophers and reformers, are aware, of course, that much, much more than attention to the physical arrangements is necessary. But both love and appreciate the physical detailing, and by their very concentration upon it suggest that short blocks, or mixed uses, or new towns with jobs one can walk to will do more than these concepts actually can do to create a good city.

I fear the confusion attendant upon an orientation and a program that hopes to achieve social ends through physical means. Certainly we should be aware of any connections that do exist between the two, and our knowledge of this problem is still terribly inadequate. Design can do something to reduce crime on public transportation, in parks, in housing projects—but crime is really a much more complex problem than design. Design can perhaps do something to affect people's family life or children's capacity to study or to achieve in school—but really, once again, it cannot do very much. There is, after all, a good deal of justice—even if not what was intended—in the old saw of the conservatives that slums are made by slum-dwellers, and not vice versa. The truth is that social surroundings are more important in determining what happens to people than are physical surroundings.

CONSIDER, for example, the fact that in Tokyo the proportion of dwellings listed as slums is considerably smaller than in New York City. The average Tokyo nonslum dwelling is physically inferior to the average New York slum dwelling: It is not connected to a sewage system; does not have bathing facilities, has no system of central heating, and is very shoddily constructed. Why, then, are so few dwellings in Tokyo considered slums? The two societies, of course, with different levels of wealth, have very different standards of a decent minimum, and the Japanese standard is much lower than the American. But this is only part, and a really small part, of the explanation of why Tokyo has fewer slums than New York. The main explanation is that Tokyo does not have as large a social-problem population as New York. In a variety of ways, the slums of any city will tend to equal the number of people defined as social problems, regardless of the quality of design and construction. Disorganized families, the very poor, the long-range unemployed will generally live in slums. If a race or ethnic group is defined as inferior, then the places in which that race or group lives will be considered slums. Thus, one speaks of the Negro slums of a city, and has in mind not only the places that are really slums, but those simply in which Negroes live.

This is not to say we do not need better housing for the poor—of course we do. But in terms both of their needs and of society's hopes for them, better housing and even better neighborhoods (defined in terms of design) may not have a very high priority. Employment and improved education may both be more important in changing slum-dwellers than replacing the slums.

EVEN the need for new housing for the poor is generally exaggerated. We have substantial vacancy rates in this country—more than in any other economically advanced country. We build at a very rapid rate. Slum-dwellers do not, on the whole, live in very crowded conditions (New York is exceptional). The chief problems of our slums are social — unemployment, poor education, broken families, crime. These are problems that inevitably will not be in the province of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Nor can they be solved by physical means, whether by urban-renewal projects, which remove the slums and push the slum-dwellers into housing which will turn into slums, or even by programs that build housing directly for the poor. Such programs may have another virtue—they will provide better housing. But we should be aware that if we want the social benefits that we have believed come with this, quite different measures will be necessary.

The most decisive of the social problems that we think of when we consider the urban crisis—the integration of Negroes into the American city and American society—is particularly immune to attack by means of the physical improvement of the city. A housing project is labeled, by those outside and those inside, a "Negro slum," regardless of its physical character, if it is—as so many are—almost completely Negro. Any public housing for the poor in our large cities will be largely Negro. It is not that there are not enough poor whites—but they may be old, or frightened of Negroes, or prejudiced, and they will have larger opportunities to find housing they can afford in the open market. The task of providing housing for the poor that will not become a Negro ghetto strains all our social ingenuity. "Small" housing projects are fought as vigorously by their neighbors as "large" housing projects—however small, they may turn into miniature ghettos. "Scattered" public housing—if it is a method of facilitating entry of Negroes into white areas —is fought even more vigorously. Urban renewal has in a number of cities successfully produced integrated housing —but generally upper-middle-income housing, in which white and black will unite against close contact with poor Negroes. These are urban problems indeed, and national problems, but it is difficult to see how new housing, new towns, public transportation and open space solve them.

A SECOND great inadequacy in the criticism is the failure to come to terms with our political structure. We find it enormously difficult in this country to arrange the levels of government and their resources and functions in such a way as to best meet our urban needs. I am not suggesting that every metropolitan area needs one government and one alone, that the 1,400 governments of the New York metropolitan area should become one supergovernment. There are many virtues in our incredibly varied systems of local government, for they give many people the opportunity to participate at some level in decisions that affect them. The political scientists Robert C. Wood, Edward C. Banfield and Morton Grodzins have pointed out the many mechanical and social fallacies in the demand for metropolitan government. Nevertheless, I am convinced our systems of local government place too great difficulties in the way of fairly direct solutions to certain problems.

One looks enviously at Japan's solution to the problem of rapid surface transportation needed to connect the parts of its great megalopolis —the building in only a few years of the new Tokaido line from Tokyo to Osaka. The *technical* problems of building a new line from Boston to Washington to transport people at 150 miles an hour are much simpler. The *political* problems are enormously more complex.

The character of local government seriously affects our school system, because of the great differences in the real estate base of each city or school district. It seriously distorts the judgment of mayors and planners, who desperately seek to bring middle-income taxpayers back to the central city with urban renewal projects which may be misguided on other grounds.

There are ways, of course, of mitigating such pressures. If we make the Federal system responsible for the equalization of resources, every city, whether rich or poor, will have what is considered a decent minimum for schools, welfare and other city services. Men who combine practical and theoretical knowledge, such as Daniel P. Moynihan, the sociologist and former Assistant Secretary of Labor, and Edward P. Eichler, the California housing authority, emphasize this as the best measure to improve our cities. The problem, however, remains that practical men must devote years to the construction of Rube Goldberg contraptions to permit what has to take place, and they may then discover that the contraption is in command. Is there some way to reduce the enormous drain our political structure places on our men of energy and competence? Or is this simply the genius of American democracy, and must we reconcile ourselves to making the best of it?

Once again, just as in the case of our discussion of the relation between physical and social problems, we cannot discuss the problem of local government in isolation from the fact that Negro populations of central cities are rapidly rising while the governments of much of the rest of the outer metropolitan areas devote a good deal of their energy to keeping Negroes out. However irrational a political system may be from the point of view of providing good education for all, or good housing for all, it may be eminently rational from the point of view of keeping out people who it is assumed will increase the costs of government and reduce real estate values, and whom many of the residents prefer not to have as neighbors.

Our tendency is to set up special governments with sharply defined functions, so we can have at least some good transportation, or a decent water system, or a park system. The Federal Government now encourages such creation of special governments, for obviously we cannot wait for the creation of appropriate forms of local government before we attack such problems as air pollution and water pollution.

This is all we can do—but one effect, and perhaps the most disturbing one, is

that we create such complex forms of government that citizens are helpless to understand how they operate and to make intelligent decisions about them. Even mayors and councilmen and other city officials often find the means by which we handle our urban problems too complex to grasp fully. Perhaps only political scientists expert in this area fully understand them.

As a result, there is a growing gap between urban critics, whatever the brilliance or ingenuity of their proposals, and the practical men of affairs. The first propose, and the second ask in despair, but what *means* do we possess to carry out such programs? The men of affairs huff and puff, performing acrobatics in making the obvious possible by working either across the lines of fragmented local government, or across the lines of the different levels of government. The critics and certainly the people are hardly aware of their efforts, and obviously are only disappointed at the results.

FINALLY, the third weakness of the urban critics is the failure to consider adequately one terribly serious question—what do the people really want? Does our analysis of urban ills and proposal of urban solutions really satisfy what they want? Obviously the analysis of what people want is a very subtle and complex thing. Paul Goodman, the novelist and social essayist, has pointed out many times that people do not know what they want until they see alternatives. We may *think* we want houses on little plots of land on endless tracts while no alternative exists. Confronted with alternatives, we may discover we prefer arrangements which emphasize more communal uses, rather than one which cuts up all land and resources in little family-size packages.

One must also add, however, that we can satisfy what people want only within economic limits—and I mean the economic limits of any social system. Inevitably, scarce resources impose choices. The communal playing field or the larger private yard? Open space removed from the market and preserved for appreciation, or cheaper land for building? Money for public transportation, or even more money for freeways? The awesome growth of Southern California, or new towns in the emptying Great Plains? The choice of most people is not the choice of most urban critics.

Many critics who have one house in town and one in the country have argued that our style of urban development, emphasizing the small free-standing house on its own lot, destroys the virtues of city and country alike, and that a denser and more controlled style of development would preserve these separate and unique virtues. This is a reasonable point, except for the man who is going to have only one house, and wants more space than the city provides, and more access to jobs and city amusements than the country provides, and who will stand firm against measures that reduce his opportunity to have these things.

IT is a terrible thing to see the occupation of farmlands by housing tracts, the crowding of wilderness areas by boaters and campers and hikers and cars. But what alternatives are we to select? Our urban criticism has tended too often to attack the greed of the developer, the blind forces of the market, the obtuseness of the bureaucrat. And yet what if the truth is that our urban development reflects, better than the proposals of the critics, the desires of the people? The individual's desire for a privately owned automobile and a privately owned house and plot is an enormously powerful fact—not only in the United States—and it plays havoc with the best-laid plans. People will accept the planners' new towns when they have no alternatives, in situations of great housing shortage or when building is controlled by government. But when they have choices, they create Los Angeles. At any rate, this is one possible interpretation of what is happening in this country, and, I believe, the most plausible one.

Thus, when we look at our urban crisis, we see a set of problems that our planners and urban critics unfortunately do little to solve. In effect, this means that our accumulated wisdom about cities offers us few answers. Our most serious urban difficulties, to my mind, are the social consequences of the concentration in our cities of social-problem populations; the complexity of our urban political system; and the difficulty of accommodating in our cities both the desires of people for what they consider an appropriate style of life and other values, typically characteristic of élite and intellectual groups. These are our problems, and we need imagination and ingenuity to deal with them.