THREE SHORT ARTICLES

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Three short articles designed to provoke discussion and re-examination of basic principles.

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1. You Can’t Have Planning Without a Plan

In Technical Bulletin No. 27 published by the Urban Land Institute in December of 1955 is found the following extraordinary statement:

“Only 10 of the 114 reporting cities state positive reference is made to a comprehensive city plan or to a master open space plan for relating site acquisition to subdivision proposals as development takes place.”

Yet, 102 of these cities have subdivision regulations and, undoubtedly, almost all of them have what is called a planning commission and a planning department. At least, Bulletin No. 27 which deals with subdivision control practices states that most of its information came from such sources. While the majority of new urban development in the United States is apparently — somehow or another — exposed to planning, obviously much of it is not proceeding according to comprehensive city plans.

Planning commissions, planning departments, and planners were never so numerous, so well paid, so busy — and so ineffective. Why is this? Primarily because, as a profession, we have largely forgotten what we are for — what we are here to do.

We have become so happily absorbed in techniques and surveys — in origin and destination, in economic backgrounds, in decibels, street capacities, trade areas, space hours and APHA scores — that we are neglecting our major task — the preparation, public acceptance, adoption and carrying out of comprehensive city plans.

Any medium-to-large city has a municipal staff with scores of experts. There are traffic departments with traffic engineers; street departments fully qualified to build streets; school departments bulging with Ph.D.’s; park departments with play experts; health departments, building departments, and cemetery departments. And each of these knows more about its field — no doubt — than the planning department ever can — or should.

What, then, is the planning department for? To coordinate? Obviously not. That is the job of the mayor, manager, or chief administrator. He can see that the new freeway doesn’t go through the new housing project or that the new school isn’t built in the neighborhood that is to be redeveloped for industry. The planner’s job is more than mere coordination. It is to see that all these efforts and projects — both public and private — bring about the most desirable possible community in which to live and work.

How is this to be done? Surely not by expressing opinions on current projects and issues — saying, “We like this — build it,” or “We don’t like that there — build it two blocks further south.” Opinions such as these cannot stand up against the more technically qualified opinions of other departments, particularly when these are supported, as they frequently are, by vigorous minority pressure groups. The urban environment continues to deteriorate with the highway people putting freeways where they want them, with school authorities locating schools where they want them, with the zoning ordinance written the way the Real Estate Board wants it, and with redevelopment projects planned the way promoters want them. In other words, creation of poor urban living conditions continues, except that we have planning departments and planners to throw thin cloaks of respectability over the process.

So often, the planners and the planning commissions are like the song; they “can’t say no.” They are popular — but aren’t bringing about better cities.

We have put ourselves in this valley of frustration by emphasizing the wrong thing. The emphasis should be on the city plan — not planning or the planning commission, or the planner. The planners’ and the planning commissions’ proper place in the hierarchy of municipal development is found only when they are the authors and guardians of the city’s PLAN and when the PLAN is the recognized and accepted guide for all improvements — both public and private. A freeway may well be built in a poor location, if planners and highway engineers disagree on technicalities. It is not likely to be built in a poor location if the publicly understood and supported and published official city plan shows the right location for it.

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Without such a city plan, there is no reason for a planning commission, a planning department or a planner. In fact, a city might be better off without them as they are but an expensive delusion, implying that something is present when it is not.

We should rename our planning commission and planning departments. They should be PLAN COMMISSIONS, or — better yet — COMMISSIONS ON THE CITY PLAN (as some of them are). The “Directors of Planning” should become “Directors of the City Plan.” The “Departments of Planning” should become the “Departments for the City Plan.”

The first job of the city plan commission and city planner is to prepare and secure the recognition and adoption of an official city plan. The only other job is to secure the carrying out of the plan. Almost all municipal planning enabling acts emphasize such a procedure. We must not fool ourselves; there is no planning without a plan.

2. Needed: One-Dimensional City Plans

For many years City Planners, and particularly those with an engineering background, have been criticized because they produced “two-dimensional” city plans — i.e. on maps. It was contended that this was bad because it gave no consideration to the third dimension — height. These criticisms have been most frequently leveled by members of the architectural profession, largely because the two-dimensional map did not show at a glance where the multi-story buildings were to be.*

To those of us that have been busy preparing city plans, this talk of “dimensions” indicates a basic lack of understanding of the problems involved.

A city plan is one of the most important means at hand to improve urban environment. To be effective it must recognize and deal with all of urban life. To do this it cannot be limited by “dimensions.” In addition to the simple ones of length, breadth, and height, the city plan must deal with such “dimensions” as time, climate, geology, sociology, economics, geography, ecology, anthropology, astronomy, physiology, and psychology — to mention just a few.

The city plan should present a detailed, realistic — and inspiring picture of the city of tomorrow — a plan so practical that we can start building it today, yet visionary enough to impel persons to start this building. A plan that does not deal with all dimensions cannot do this.

Yet our cities were never growing more rapidly than they are right now. There was never so great a need for good city plans effectively and forcefully administered. And this is in the face of a frightening shortage of planning personnel.

As planners imbued with the scientific process we are firm believers in the factual approach — in surveys, analyses, estimates — in considering carefully each and every “dimension.” Yet while we are “studying” the city is growing — usually so fast that the “study” is obsolete before the first rough draft has been typed.

A part of these surveys and studies, we know, are really not pertinent. They are window dressing and nothing more. All of us know of origin-destination surveys that were analyzed after the major street plan was made. All of us have seen elaborate economic and population studies that did not affect the city plan one iota. Is it not true that we are actually collecting a lot of information that we are not using — or not using to an extent that justifies its collection? And is it not true that valuable planning personnel is being wasted in this process?

In every planning problem, in every recommendation of the comprehensive plan, there is usually one key factor — or “dimension” — that controls the design. For example, in one city there was a controversy over the location of a bridge over a large river. There appeared to be several possible locations and each had its advocates. Numerous surveys, studies, plans, estimates and reports were made without resolution of the problem. Finally, it was suggested that subsurface borings be made at each location. This was done. The borings showed that there was only one location where it was practical to build a bridge!

In other cities, particularly those with rough topography, basic physical conditions may set the neighborhood pattern — irrespective of the sociological aspects of the situation.

If the city planner is to be worth his salt, he should be able to determine the key “dimension” or factor for each problem, or part of the city plan. Staff work can then be directed — “streamlined” toward the prime objective — the preparation, public acceptance, adoption, and carrying out of comprehensive city plans. If land use and topography govern the location of expressways, the city planner will not waste time on an involved traffic survey. Precise details of development can be left to other departments, keeping them busy, happy, and out of mischief. This also will be saving of staff time.

The crying need is to coordinate urban development with an over-all plan — now. And the over-all plan will be just as good, in fact will be just the same, if we just study those factors — or “dimensions” — that will affect the plan.

Finally, a city plan that may be a bit inadequate — or even “two-dimensional” — if put actively to work coordinating new city growth is going to be far more valuable than the “perfect” plan that considered all dimensions but arrived on the scene too late.

*It is well known that architects are fascinated by multi-story buildings — this is because of something to do with their fees, I have been told.
3. The Flexible City Plan is No City Plan at All

Look Magazine's issue of March 6, 1956 contained an interesting article on Los Angeles, a community that has had active planning programs for three decades and which currently supports public planning staffs in excess of 200 persons. According to the Look Magazine article, the local taxpayer was receiving little benefit from the numerous persons on these planning staffs. The article stated:

"Homeowners live under the double jeopardy of zoning changes and freeway development; if one doesn’t wreck you, the other will."

In regard to the freeways, the article went on to say:

"It is like sitting on a keg of TNT, for a freeway can wreck a neighborhood. The homeowner caught squarely in the monster’s path is lucky. He gets paid the full market price for his house and lot. Those left along the fringe of those eight whizzing lanes of traffic get depreciated property values, along with exhaust fumes, grinding truck gears and endless other traffic noises. The fringe dweller suffers even more if he is caught near an on or off ramp. Then his quiet little street can get trucks and seething traffic in addition to noise and fumes and depreciated values.

"State spokesmen say this secrecy about freeway routing is necessary to forestall speculation along proposed routing. This seems to make sense in sparsely settled areas. It doesn’t make so much sense in neighborhoods where there isn’t a vacant lot left for speculation.

"The whole thing makes Angelenos dream of the days of 10 years ago. Most of the proposed routings were bean and asparagus patches at that time. What a little planning, and zoning laws with teeth in them, could have accomplished then."1

True enough, the article did not blame the planners but blamed the "expeditor and the fly-by-night developer" — and the policy of the California State Highway Division.

Los Angeles, unfortunately, is not an exception. In many cases such as this we should admit that the planner should be blamed too. He has allowed the "expeditor and the fly-by-night developer" and the politician to sell planning and the city plan "down the river" — and has helped them do it.

Thorough, effective city planning is very difficult to sell. It is almost miraculous when as much as two-thirds of a city’s development is in accordance with a city plan. To build a city according to a plan is diametrically opposed to those organized minorities that live on expediency such as the politician, many real estate interests — and frequently chambers of commerce. The people benefited never come to public hearings; they seldom have a spokesman; they seldom have paid retainers or national and local lobbies.

Opposition to building a city according to a plan is vocal, effective, and energetic. Instead of endeavoring to overcome such opposition openly, planners have endeavored to placate it, to sugar-coat the pill, and to make planning as painless as possible.

A popular means of doing this is to play down the importance of the city plan by stating that “the city plan is flexible” and can be “adjusted to meet changed conditions in the future” or that the city plan is merely a study to assist in “determining immediate public policies” or that “planning is a process.” Down deep in his heart every planner knows that these statements are not true. As so often happens, sufficient repetition of a falsehood as a truth has resulted in its being accepted as a truth.

Let us look into this idea of the “flexible city plan” for just a moment.

Our cities are made up of literally thousands of individual parts — most of them quite small. Individual buildings, streets, sewer mains, utility lines, none of which are important in themselves, together comprise the fabric of the city. The manner in which these fit together and work together — and appear together — determines whether or not the city will be a good place in which to live and work — will be beautiful — or will be a convenient and efficient physical organization.

Now each of these individual parts, each of these "improvements," is relatively permanent. Every home that is built today will be here a half-century from now; most of our "improvements" will be around for 100 years; the street pattern in a new subdivision may be with us for 500 or 1000 years. The city of the future is built today. Generations of the future will not be able to change it much more than we are changing the city of today by urban renewal — and that certainly affects but a minute portion of our total city area.

Our planning for the city of the future is effective only in the degree that it affects the parts of the city of the future that we are building today. Unless all these small parts are coordinated with the city plan when they are built, our accomplishment is nil.

Now, when a man comes in for a building permit, or submits the plat of a proposed subdivision, if any coordination is to be achieved, the city plan must then be definite, specific, and precise and not vague or flexible. The city officials must be in a position to tell the applicant that his building is on a major street that is to be widened and that he is to build it 7 feet 9 inches back from the front lot line. Or that his proposed subdivision is to provide for a planned major street which street has an alignment that can

Quotations from Look Magazine, March 6, 1956, with appreciation to the publishers for their kind permission.
be exactly determined and which street is to be 120 feet wide. Comparable examples can be given for the reservation of land for schools and parks and of other adjustments of individual developments to a comprehensive city plan.

The most desirable condition prevails, however, when the public is so well informed in regard to the comprehensive city plan — through its official adoption, publication, and distribution — that private improvements almost automatically are adjusted to the city plan in advance of applications for permits or approvals.

Now, after a subdivider has dedicated a park or school site, or provided for a major street extension or widening — or after many property owners have built buildings back from a street that is to be widened, or after several years of building has been done in reliance upon a comprehensive zoning ordinance, we cannot say:

“Sorry, it was a flexible plan — the school site is one-fourth mile too far west” — or

“The major street isn’t needed with the new freeway” — or

“We’re not going to widen that street after all, we’ll use a pair of one-way streets instead.”

A flexible city plan is no city plan at all. It cannot do a thing toward bringing order out of chaos in our urban growth. Its major accomplishment is to be able to agree with everyone and keep the politicians and special interest groups happy. In fact, the more inflexible a plan would be, the more effective it would be in guiding urban development.

It can be objected that no city planner has a 100 percent effective “crystal ball” in which he can see the future and that he and his plan commission — and his city council — will make mistakes that will have to be corrected. This is true. However, a carefully prepared city plan will contain only a small portion of such mistakes. On the big issues — the basic land use pattern, the major street and freeway system, and the school and park locations — planners today are well enough qualified not to make many mistakes. And even if there are a few mistakes — and these mistakes are built — this will be far better than continuation of an unplanned and uncoordinated urban pattern without real control or direction at all.

The trouble in Los Angeles is not that there is no planning but that there is not one single definite, specific city plan that is being carried out by all public and private groups concerned in building the city. The plans are all subject to change — are all “flexible” — and a “flexible” city plan is no city plan at all.