“URBAN SPRAWL” 
NEED NOT BE A TRAGEDY

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The haphazard spilling-out of our urban areas over the countryside with no form or pattern and no seeming sense or reason unquestionably is the most disturbing aspect of our present-day urban development.

This unplanned scattering of the city may eventually create a conflict between urban use and land available for agriculture, long a problem in England. All the experts on urban growth are unanimous in decrying this condition, which they term “urban sprawl.” With the automobile and improved roads, transportation no longer holds an urban area together but, rather, breaks it up. The underground system of sewer and water mains is about all that is holding it together.

What will our urban areas look like if there is neither natural nor artificial control over their basic pattern?

Is urban sprawl an unrelieved tragedy?

For an answer to these questions, let’s consider one specific example.

In southwestern Michigan, a sandy soil—perfect for septic tanks—and a high water table have made public water and sewer systems almost unnecessary. From an inspection of this area we perhaps can foresee the form of the future urban area.

In this region, any line between urban and rural has disappeared. New industries are found in rural areas. Residential uses of an urban character are found along almost all of the rural roads.

I doubt that there is a single farm family that does not receive a significant portion of its income from urban employment by one or more members of the family. Seemingly rural townships have doubled or tripled in population in the past decade.

The suburban or exurban growth has gone so far that many cities have given up any attempt to extend city limits to keep up with it. The urban sprawl does not look half bad. In fact, it looks pretty good.

Planning and zoning measures are essential primarily to keep commercial uses, billboards, and junk yards from scattering up and down the highways and to keep a few substandard houses, or shacks, from spoiling several square miles of countryside. These troublesome occurrences are frequent; most were in place before the rural township governments caught on to what was happening.

To the new homeowner locating in a rural or semirural part of this region, there are significant advantages.

Families in such areas have plenty of light and air around their homes, large lots, association with nature. They may raise animals or grow a large garden.

They have a close-to-home government on a school-district or township basis, and reasonable taxes, particularly if a big, new industry locates in their district. Of course, public services are poor or missing and insurance rates are high—but no family seems to mind.

A complete dispersion of all our urban areas along the lines of this southern prototype is not for perhaps another century. Some experts have predicted that next two or three decades will see 14 giant strip cities that will consume 80 per cent of our population.

It would appear far more probable, however, that the outcome will be a dispersion as to cause the words urban and rural, city, and country to have so little difference in meaning that no one may ever know—care—whether the 14 strip cities came into existence.

What will happen to our present urban areas? The newer parts, built at low density and with due regard for open space, no doubt will remain because their amortized price and value will be competitive with new construction.

Other parts, particularly those built at an abnormally high density, such as the new public housing in St. Louis and some of our intensely developed urban-renewal projects, probably will be cast aside and abandoned.

The face of the globe carries the scars of many abandoned cities from other civilizations; there is no reason to suppose that some of ours will not suffer the same fate. Certainly it would be a well-deserved end for many of them. If our urban areas do not measure up to our needs, we will abandon them—and cost will not stand in the way.

But suppose we consider the conservation of the urban area important enough to do something about it. What then?

Our cities furnish some inspiring examples of conservation: Rocky Creek and other parks in the District of Columbia, the mountain parks of Denver, the magnificent park system of Kansas City with its preservation of the scenic values of bluffs and valleys, Stanley Park in Vancouver, the parks of Minneapolis—the list is almost endless.

Park systems that preserve areas of scenic interest, of course, are the most dramatic examples of urban conservation. Others include the planting of trees, particularly street trees, and the large-lot, single-family-
subdivision that has been carefully adjusted to topography.

In some of these latter developments close to the center of the city, we frequently find numerous song birds, quail, and sometimes pheasant, lots of rabbits and squirrels, and occasionally a skunk or raccoon. The presence of such wildlife can be considered pretty much a seal of approval for the designer of such a subdivision.

On the other side of the picture, the bulldozer probably symbolizes the negative aspect of urban conservation. In many instances, the development of a subdivision is preceded by two steps:

1. Cutting down all the trees in sight.
2. Flattening the land as much as possible, preferably burying the topsoil under 10 feet or so of clay.

Housing projects and subdivisions resulting from this process have a bare, forlorn appearance for decades—despite the untold fortunes spent on grass seed and fertilizer.

To save trees and fit a design into the natural landscape require careful attention on the part of landscape architects who know their business. While their fees may be high, investigation of a few examples convinces us that this cost is not nearly so much as that of the bulldozer operator and the bulldozer approach to subdivision development. The result, of course, when you design with the land is a development far more pleasant to live in and much more valuable.

Nor is the principle limited to residential subdivisions. Saving native plant material and fitting designs to topography are essential to commercial and industrial areas also. They are virtually indispensable to public and institutional facilities.

A final example on the negative side of urban conservation is the use of land for intensive urban purposes in the flood plains of our rivers. Expensive flood-control works could have been avoided in some cases if the flood plain had been properly zoned.

In general, there are three measures needed for improved urban development, or urban conservation:

I. Planning and zoning.

While the growth of city planning and zoning has been rapid, it is falling behind constantly in its attempt to keep up with the tremendously dynamic problems of urban growth. Our planning and zoning are least effective in dealing with the most vital problem: the growth and development of the urban fringe areas.

We know that well-drafted and enforced planning and zoning measures can effectively guide new urban growth before it occurs but are quite frustrating instruments when used to try to correct mistakes after they have been made.

It is the rural areas, the counties and the townships, where our planning and zoning efforts should be concentrated. Every county in the United States should have been zoned at least 15 years ago, yet it was estimated in 1958 that not more than 200 of the 3,100 counties in the nation were zoned. And in some that are zoned, the quality of the regulations leaves much to be desired. Furthermore, 1,900 of our counties could not enact zoning regulations if they wanted to; state enabling legislation is lacking.

Counties and townships that do not have good zoning regulations in effect 10 years from now probably will find that it is too late to do more than reap the sad harvest of the urban hodgepodge within their borders.

We need more and better regional planning, too. City limits, as I indicated in discussing the development in southwest Michigan, are meaningless today and will be absurd tomorrow as a planning boundary. Every state should have legislation providing for effective regional planning similar to that enacted by Oklahoma and Indiana.

The local city, county, or township cannot be expected to do a good job of planning or zoning without being able to relate its plans to the larger region of which it is a part. Nor can these larger regions do a good job without relating their work to state and nation.

We desperately need thorough and effective planning at the state and national levels for such matters as land use, water resources, economic trends, and the like. The planning recently undertaken by Hawaii was perhaps the first example of the broad-scale type that is needed.

II. Fitting development plans to the land.

Both encouragement and local legislation are required to bring about land development more suited to the topography.

An ordinance of the village of Blue Ash, Ohio, for example, prohibits subdivisions from destroying any tree four or more inches in diameter unless it is within a roadway, driveway, or actual building site. The interest of garden clubs in such matters is heartening, but far more needs to be done.

We should all fuss, complain, write letters to the newspapers, and talk to anyone who will listen until cruelty to land becomes as offensive as cruelty to animals.

III. More public land.

One of our biggest troubles is that all of our local governmental agencies are land poor. In all our communities, we need to preserve great acreages for greenbelts, for forest preserves, or for what may be a far more valuable long-range use—for agriculture.

There is no reason why we cannot use the device of purchasing development rights to much of this property, thus insuring a proper future land use. Our vastly increased urban population will require many more parks, reservations, forest preserves, lakes, beaches, and so on. Good land use in the semi-urban, semirural community of tomorrow will require a revision in our concept of public-land ownership. In essence, this will be an expansion of the type of activity being undertaken so successfully by several county forest-preserve districts in Illinois.

Urban development of the future should tend more and more to fit itself into, if not disappear into, the natural landscape. Then the blots on the landscape will perhaps fade away.