REGIONAL PLANNING—THE BIG PICTURE AS SEEN
FROM THE PICTURE WINDOW

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by

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Since the end of World War II national attention has
been more and more focused on the sorry state of the urban
environment in the United States. We hear much about the
"mess that is man made America." All of us, it seems, are
distressed at the condition of our cities; at their decay
and ugliness, the traffic congestion, the billboard alleys,
the poor environment in which we live and rear our children,
and the obstacles that obsolete urban areas place in the way
of the efficient conduct of business and industry. We are
coming to realize the importance of the urban environment
to each individual, to the business man and to the indus-
trialist. Most of all we are beginning to realize the im-
portance of the quality of the urban environment to the
competitive position of one community as it seeks to secure
new business and new industry or to keep the ones that it has.
All is not well with the urban environment and where this
environment is poor we pay a large social and economic price
for a poor product.

One of the problems in connection with the problem is
that it is a "devil take the hind-most" type of a situation.
We do not accept the fact that one agency or one type of
agency must be responsible for the urban environment. Who
is responsible? Our units of local government, the cities,
the counties, and the townships are the agencies that are
responsible. This responsibility has literally been thrust
upon them and they are slowly and reluctantly starting to
accept the responsibility. This is their responsibility for
the simple reason that they are the only possible type of
organization that can be responsible. There must be someone,
some agency, whose job it is to improve the urban environment
and to make sure that new urban growth is built at a satis-
factory standard. The State Governments show no disposition
to do this; the Federal Government is too far away and too
remote and could not possibly do the job. It is clearly the
job of the local governmental units to straighten out our
problems with the urban environment.

In our office, which has now been in existence for almost
50 years, we have had the opportunity of working with more
than 200 American communities on planning problems. Among
other things, this has taught us that each community is an
individual. It has its own unique problem. A solution to
a problem in one community may be completely inapplicable in
another, even though on the surface the physical conditions
may seem to be almost alike. Each community must be treated
as an individual if the solution is to be found. No broad
principles or standards can be inflexibly applied to each and every one, and it is at this point that many of our state-wide and nation-wide programs for dealing with these problems get into difficulties.

Our local communities are slowly beginning to accept their responsibility for the improvement of the urban environment. This is an important responsibility, equal to that of police protection, or fire protection, or sanitation, or the water supply. This has to be a major and important function of local government. It involves permanent staffs with persons trained in the field and the expenditure of considerable sums of public money on a continuous basis, if the responsibility is to be properly fulfilled. In a manner similar to the other functions of local government this responsibility, in the final analysis, falls on the citizens of the community, who must understand and support the necessary programs for improving the urban environment if these are to have a chance of success.

We have been struggling with the problem of the improvement of our urban environment in this country continuously over this entire century. The past six decades of effort, of trial and error (sometimes it seems mostly of error) have built up a process that we can follow in getting at the solution to the problem.

When we look at our communities we see that the urban fabric in large part consists of a great number of relatively small things. There are a great number of individual buildings, most of which are small. Of the total mileage of streets in a city most consist of relatively narrow and relatively insignificant streets. The important feature of the environment is that its character is dependent upon two things: how well these numerous small parts fit together, one with another, and second, how well the pattern that they make fits the natural conditions of the site of the city, its topography, its climate, its economy, and its customs.

Elihu Root once commented that the city was "a multitude of human impulses." This was another way of saying that it is built by many people, by many public agencies, and private corporations over a long period of time. We are fond of saying that the city is not static, but that it changes from day to day as new parts are added, old parts taken away, and existing parts are changed.

If the quality of the urban environment is determined by how well the individual parts fit together and how well
the complex of these parts fits the site of the city, then it is rather obvious that we are going to have to have some means of coordinating this "multitude of human impulses" and some means of exercising a degree of civic design in seeing that features of natural beauty are preserved and that land is used in the most appropriate possible manner over the entire urban area. The process that we have developed to accomplish this is to prepare, adopt and amend, from time to time, a Comprehensive Plan, which plan looks forward some 20 to 30 years in the future, and presents a general picture or scheme for land use and development, a pattern into which the community or region could grow. These plans are then used as a means of coordinating the day-to-day efforts in building the community.

This process is much easier to describe than to accomplish. In our cities we have two types of building activities. The greater part of the urban area is built by private enterprise which is responsible for the construction and operation of the residential, commercial, industrial, and many of the quasi-public activities. Then we have the public agencies which build facilities that serve the complex of private buildings such as streets, sewer lines, water, parks, and which further provides the entire complex, both public and private, with such essential services as police and fire protection. Generally speaking, we endeavor to coordinate the private building activities with a Comprehensive Plan by a series of municipal regulations, by zoning, by subdivision control, and by building and housing ordinances. Insofar as the public activities are concerned, we mostly just hope and pray that the various public agencies somehow or another will all be good fellows and coordinate their efforts along the lines indicated by the plan. This "hope and pray" approach is necessitated by the fact that we have a great number of relatively independent single-purpose public agencies such as state highway departments operating in our urban communities and most of these are completely free to do as they please, either to accept or to ignore desires on the part of the community that they coordinate their activities with some type of overall plan.

Now, the minute that we endeavor to prepare any type of a plan for an individual community we run right into a major and compelling feature of the twentieth-century society, and that is an almost unbelievably complex series of interrelationships between one community and adjacent communities, between adjacent communities and their economic region, between the region and the state, and between the region and the nation as a whole. This goes even further. There are
important interrelationships of a global nature that have an impact upon the local community. Current forecasts, for example, indicate serious world-wide food shortages within the next 30 to 50 years. Students of this problem conclude that within the United States there is one of the world's greatest reservoirs of fine farm land. It may well be that within 50 years much of the world will be depending upon this nation for its food supply. Possibly, our agricultural land is far more valuable and far more important to the human race than any of us have realized, and perhaps we would be wise right now to direct growth of our urban areas in such a manner that first-rate farm land was not pre-empted by subdivisions or industry. This is merely one example of the type of interrelationship that must be studied and given attention to in the development of the Comprehensive Plan. We cannot plan any community in isolation, nor can we plan any community merely for its corporate area. We must take a larger view. Hence, we have regional planning and such agencies as the Fox Valley Regional Planning Commission. Such commissions are absolutely essential if local planning is to be placed in proper focus and if it is to be done effectively.

Fundamental to effective regional planning is the control of the area that is to be occupied for urban purposes. For example, in the St. Louis Bi-State Region we have 3,600 square miles of land. Today the 2,000,000 persons occupying this region are utilizing for urban purposes about one-sixth of the total area. The remaining five-sixths consists of agricultural uses, woodlands, and open space. The metropolitan area may grow to a population of five million by the turn of the century. When the population of five million is reached at an even more generous land use-to-population ratio only about one-half of the land area will be occupied for urban uses. Which areas are going to be built upon, and which are to be left in agriculture or in permanent open spaces? Here is the real essence of regional planning. I think it is obvious to any thinking person that a rational and intelligent decision should be made on this most fundamental of planning problems. Land that is of excellent quality for agriculture should probably be preserved for that purpose. Land of high scenic importance should be kept as scenery and not built upon. Land in flood plains should be prevented from intensive occupancy. This type of a basic land use planning of areas to be built upon and areas not to be built upon would seem to be a relatively simple thing to work out, and no doubt it is. However, there are almost insuperable difficulties in carrying out such a plan. This is primarily because hardly a single American community has
endeavored to say which land should and which land should not be built upon on a regional basis.

One of the reasons why this most fundamental type of regional planning has not been done is that the rapid growth of our communities has set up wave upon wave of speculative increases in land values around them. Speculation in land in and around urban areas has become more than a game. For many people it has become a way of life. Any basic restriction of building would immediately "step on the toes" of those who have a speculative interest in increases in land value.

Recently we had occasion to investigate the employment pattern in the St. Louis Metropolitan area, in relationship to this general problem. We found that not over one and one-half percent of the total employment was involved in the city building process. This included the realtors, the home builders, the contractors, all persons who were engaged in the city building process. At first glance this would seem to greatly simplify the problem with say 98 ½ percent of the population on one side and one and one-half percent on the other. It is not so simple a matter, however. Careful examination of decisions made by responsible local governments in most of our urban areas would, I believe, indicate that the decision is made in favor of the one and one-half percent probably 90 percent of the time and in favor of the 98 ½ percent possibly ten percent of the time. The construction of our urban areas is a profit making activity. It is a good business and the proposals, well meaning as they may be, of a comprehensive planning program to introduce greater stability in land value, greater rationale to the urban pattern, and to provide for a greater degree of amenity in the urban environment frequently run counter to the profit making activity. This is a fact of life which we need to face up to.

Except for a few American communities there has been little endeavor to control the pattern of urbanization. Lincoln, Nebraska, is one such community. Lincoln has a city-county regional planning commission. The Comprehensive Plan establishes quite firm limits of the area to be devoted to intensive urbanization. The remaining land has been placed in a rural zone, and to date, this pattern has been rather successfully maintained, although it has been subjected to considerable degrees of speculative pressure. A number of counties in California have undertaken the same type of activity, however, in most instances these merely represent a case of "locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen."
How good a job are we doing in providing an improved urban environment in the United States? Unfortunately we have to face up to the fact that the job we are doing is not very good. Essentially to the present time it has been a poor job, and this admission comes hard from one who has spent the past 30 years of his life actively engaged in this type of endeavor.

Certainly the first essential of any urban planning at all is the control of the basic pattern of urbanization. As previously mentioned, we are doing very little along this line. The number of communities doing an effective job of saying which areas may and may not be built upon probably may be numbered on the fingers of one hand.

It is also discouraging to compare the quality of urban environment being provided in the United States with that being provided in Western Europe. It comes as a shock to have someone say to you, as happened to me last summer in Norway, that "there are no slums in my country." For several decades we have been contenting ourselves with the excuse that our inadequate urban environment was balanced by the greater material prosperity that we had, that it was one of the prices that we had to pay for television, for two cars in every garage, for the dish washer, the garbage disposal, and similar material advantages. We can no longer say this because the people of Western Europe now are beginning to obtain all of these same material advantages and at the same time they have not, except in a few instances, sacrificed the quality of their urban environment to obtain them.

I think it is obvious that we need to greatly step up and increase the vigor and scope of our planning activities.

We must reluctantly admit, I believe, a compelling need for a degree of public control over the urban building process, much greater than that heretofore exercised. This control, however, must be local in nature. There is no other way that it can practically be exercised and no other way that the job can be done. In exercising a more vigorous type of local planning and control of the urbanization process we run immediately into our great need for adequately trained and experienced personnel to staff the local planning agencies to enable this type of activity to be carried on effectively. While this is probably our greatest single current bottleneck, it also is an opportunity for the younger generations who will live in these cities. More needs to be done to attract the capable intelligent young persons into the fields of city planning, regional planning, landscape architecture, and civil engineering.
In addition to solving the personnel problem, there are a number of other measures that need to be undertaken.

First of all, our methods of land use control are crude and inadequate to get the job done. Zoning regulations are an excellent means of preserving and protecting property values in an area where the initial development has been satisfactory. It does little to improve an area that is poor to begin with. It is a relatively inflexible and unsatisfactory method for guiding and controlling new urban growth. Except for the state-wide zoning in the State of Hawaii, it has not been effectively used as an instrument to control the basic pattern of urbanization.

Control of the basic pattern of urbanization, the most fundamental and most important part of planning, is a control that very seldom can be exercised by the individual unit of local government. Certainly it would not be realistic or practical to expect that 250 municipalities and seven counties that make up the local governmental pattern in the St. Louis regional area to cooperatively join together and harmoniously carry out a program for one unified pattern of urbanization for the overall area. Furthermore, it would be difficult to obtain the necessary adjustments that would be required from time to time if a land use plan was being cooperatively carried out by 257 units of local government. The problem of communication alone would be staggering. With fewer units you might have more success in the Fox River Valley.

We need some type of a regional zoning or conservation agency with some power over the urbanization pattern, power to see that the area that is urbanized is the area most suitable to this basic use, to see that an urban pattern is created which is susceptible to economical service by public utilities and services, and yet which does not pre-empt valuable agricultural land or valuable scenic land or does not occupy land which is difficult to ore or uneconomical for building purposes.

Once this basic decision has been made as to the areas which should be urbanized, then I think we need two types of zoning regulations instead of one. I think we need a type applying to the undeveloped land and to large urban renewal areas in which a degree of flexibility may be encouraged and new development based upon a general overall comprehensive plan. In large part this would merely be an extension of the "community unit" concept wherein special consideration is given, and special flexibility provided, for large projects. This concept should be extended to include the entire area reserved for new growth.
Conventional zoning should be preserved and maintained for the areas of existing development that are of a satisfactory standard. This type of zoning can then be extended into the new areas as the areas are built up. These would be regulations that preserve the amenities and the good conditions in existing development and guide rebuilding. This would be similar to the conventional type of zoning that we have had in the past.

Zoning has been based upon a relatively simple concept of separating out the land uses one from another. One cause of poor urban environment has been the haphazard intermixture of commercial, industrial and residential uses into an incredible hodge-podge where each use was adversely affected by the others and none had a satisfactory environment for its own particular requirements. The basic premise behind this type of zoning is still sound. However, we are beginning to realize more and more that there are some intermixtures of land use which may be highly desirable if undertaken in the proper manner. In some parts of the country we are now beginning again to build shopping centers with apartments on the floors above the stores. These are proving to be quite successful. Planned intermixtures of different types of residential uses have also been undertaken successfully. Here again we enter the sticky problem that so much of the urban environment is dependent upon not what is done but how it is done.

Reorganization of the public control of land use must be accompanied by reorganization of our tax policies as they affect city building. Our current tax policies encourage speculation in land, reward the man that does a poor building job, and penalize the man that does a good building job.

Basically we need to take strong measures to bring the one and one-half percent who are building the urban areas into partnership with the needs and requirements of the 98½ percent for a vastly improved urban environment. There are several measures that would help to bring this about, included among these should be:

1. A licensing system whereby persons engaged in the city building process, the real estate men, the contractors and the homebuilders, be licensed by the local government and the license call for close coordination of their activities with the objectives of the planning program. Some persons have suggested and I think this makes good sense, for the licensed
home builder to be a public utility and in cases where warranted by the development of the community to have the authority to condemn land the same as that now possessed by a public utility company.

2. We are all familiar, I know, with proposals advanced for many years for assessing more and more of our property taxes on the land alone and less and less on the buildings. This would discourage land speculation, encourage proper use of the land, and would remove the penalty that we have placed upon new building improvements.

3. Where land should be held in open space and not built upon we should remove all speculative elements that enter into the land assessment and make it to the economic advantage of the land owner to keep this land in open space insofar as taxes are concerned.

4. We might well consider financing some of the planning and development activities by a local capital gains tax on increments in real estate values. Real estate increases in value primarily because of the growth of a community. A tax of this type would seem warranted as one means of paying for necessary civic improvements.

5. Some of the income from a capital gains tax might be used for the purchase of development rights on land that should be kept in open space.

Next we should rid ourselves of three serious but petty annoyances that do so much to deteriorate the urban environment.

1. The first of these is the great prevalence of outdoor advertising signs and billboards in our communities. These are appropriate in a few areas. However, they are ruining many of the major thoroughfares in our cities and are making a disgrace of our countryside. The next 30 years will no doubt see the almost complete elimination of this type of advertising device because we cannot continue to pay the heavy public price required to maintain these signs and the resulting continued deleterious effect upon the environment, both urban and rural. It is interesting to note that the economy of the nation is growing at a rate that would permit it to absorb the loss of the entire outdoor sign and billboard industry in approximately six hours.
2. The second is the overhead wires and the accompanying poles. These disfigure the landscape both urban and rural. In Holland where the water table is only a short distance below the surface of the ground all of these have been placed underground. It has been estimated that all of those in the United States could be placed underground with the exception of the very large transmission lines for an expenditure in the vicinity of $25 billion. The public utilities concerned might be surprised at the willingness of the general public to pay the slight increase in the power bill required to bring about this improvement in the urban and rural environment.

3. The third is the salvage and junk yards. Our civilization is one based upon "use up and throw away" principles. The automobile is a serious problem. We are piling up abandoned automobiles literally by the thousands. We expect to publicly collect and dispose of garbage and trash. We need to extend this policy to include all types of trash, including the abandoned automobile and proceed to the construction of publicly owned and operated disposal devices for all types of material. Certainly this would be less expensive than the heavy price we are paying by cluttering up our national landscape with these types of uses.

The improvement of the urban environment is a long uphill battle. Truly we have only "begun to fight". It represents probably the greatest challenge yet posed to our democratic form of government. There are many new techniques, procedures, and governmental arrangements that need to be devised and put into action.

There are two keys to the solution of the problem. One is based upon the great diversity of our American urban communities. The responsibility for the improvement of the urban environment must be left with the local community. Each community certainly is best qualified to solve its own problems. The second key is found in our need to develop additional trained personnel, qualified to deal with increasingly complex urban problems and to develop well trained citizens who are not only interested in their community but who have an understanding of the measures that should be taken to improve it.
From one point of view the hour appears late. From another, however, we need to realize that the urbanization of this country has only begun. For every city that we have today we will build at least another of equal magnitude and possibly two more such cities. As we build these it will be the individual looking out of his picture window who should be responsible for seeing that there is an always beautiful view from that window.