

CHAPTER XV

CITY PLANNING IN AMERICA

THE American city has been inadequately planned. With the exception of Washington, there has been no realization of the permanence of the city, of the importance of streets and open spaces, of building regulations, transportation, water-fronts, and the physical foundations which underlie the city's life.

The Importance of Streets.

New allotments and their intersecting streets have generally been planned by land speculators interested only in the sale of their property. They should have been laid out by the city as part of a comprehensive plan. This, in many cases, is an irreparable injury, for streets control the city as does nothing else. They make or mar its appearance. They determine its comfort and convenience. They form its circulatory system. Proper street planning is the first essential to a city plan.

It is the irregular, crooked streets of Boston that lend picturesqueness to that city. Washington is dignified and commanding because of the carefully studied combination of streets and avenues, with a large number of parks and open spaces. New York is saved from the commonplace by Broadway, which cuts diagonally across Manhattan Island and ex-

pands at intervals into Union, Madison, and Long-acre Squares. The historic streets of Europe—the Strand, Fleet and Regent Streets in London, the boulevards in Paris, the Ringstrassen in Vienna and Cologne, Unter den Linden in Berlin, the embankments in Budapest—are suggestive of the extent to which the city is dependent upon its streets. They are the commanding features of its life.

Street Planning.

William Penn was in a sense responsible for the street arrangement of the American city. In laying out Philadelphia he adopted what is known as the gridiron plan, that is, a series of rectangular streets, equal distances apart, with no radial thoroughfares. This arrangement satisfies landowners, who get the maximum use of their land, but it has little else to commend it. It is not adjusted to circulation or to business, while traffic has to zigzag across the city at great loss of time. Nor does it offer any centres or commanding sites for buildings; there are no fine vistas, only a series of uniform streets. This type of street plan has been copied by almost all of our cities with the exception of those of the East.

Cities are now finding it necessary to cut new streets through the business districts to relieve the congestion of this rectangular plan. Chicago is discussing the opening of radial boulevards through the existing street plan, while Boston has spent millions to open up new streets in the old part of the city. Philadelphia is planning a wide parkway

from the city hall to Fairmount Park, and Baltimore is projecting a boulevard from the outskirts to the centre of the city. All of these costs would have been saved had the city been intelligently planned in the beginning, as was Washington, whose streets were laid out by an expert engineer before a single house was erected. Cleveland, Buffalo, and Milwaukee, and a few Western cities, were saved from the worst features of the gridiron plan by radial thoroughfares, like the ribs of a fan, which run out from the city centre.

New York Plan.

It is said that New York was planned in 1807 by laying a mason's hand sieve across the map of the island, Broadway being left undisturbed. It was assumed that lines of traffic would always be from river to river rather than north and south. East and west streets were therefore placed close together, being only 200 feet apart, while the north and south avenues are from 700 to 900 feet apart. As the city grew the lines of traffic changed, and to-day New York suffers from inadequate north and south avenues. The traffic necessities are already so great that immense sums are being spent to relieve the mistakes of the early plans. It has become necessary to open up the lower end of Seventh Avenue in order to secure another entrance to the down-town districts, while plans have been suggested for a new avenue to be cut, at tremendous cost, from the Pennsylvania Station to the Grand Central Station, as well as a north and south

avenue between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. In addition, by reason of the rectangular street arrangement, there is scarcely a commanding site for a public building on the island.

Speaking of the result of the work of the New York Planning Commission of 1807, Mr. Frederick L. Olmsted said: "Ever since, if a building site is wanted, there is, of intention, no better place in one of these blocks than in another. There is no place in New York where a stately building can be looked up to from base to turret, none where it can even be seen full in the face and all at once taken in by the eye; none where it can be viewed in advantageous perspective. Such distinctive advantage of position as Rome gives Saint Peter's, London Saint Paul's, New York, under her system, gives to nothing."¹

The Plumbing of the City.

Transportation, gas, water, and electric light and power are as necessary to the modern city as is the plumbing of a house or the elevators of an office building. Transit controls the distribution of population. It decrees whether people shall live in tenements, as in New York and Chicago, or in suburbs, like those of Boston and Philadelphia. Transit, too, establishes the area and circumference of the city. It profoundly influences the health and well-being of the community. It has a direct connection with vice and crime. When we study the pathology of the city we will see that its dis-

¹ *Town Planning, Past, Present and Possible*, H. Inigo Triggs, p. 97.

eases are intimately connected with our failure to properly provide for transit, for municipal diseases are largely due to the inadequacy of this service.

Water, gas, and electricity are the other vital organs of the community, and they, like the street-railways, have generally been left in private hands. And private individuals decide for us not only the prices we shall pay for these services but the comforts and conveniences dependent upon them.

The License of Builders.

Private builders have also been permitted to do as they wished with their property. There has been little control of the amount of land that might be built upon, of the height of buildings, of the style of tenements, of the materials used in construction. There is no uniform sky-line. Terrible catastrophes, like the Triangle fire in New York, have resulted from our failure to control this side of the city's building. Nor is there any attempt to determine the uses to which property can be put. A man can build a factory where he wills. He can erect an apartment-house on a street dedicated to detached homes or even build a noisy garage or open a saloon or livery-stable in the residence district. The city has been unwilling or unable to control these abuses.

“All street architecture,” says H. Inigo Triggs, “is social architecture and ought surely to conform to those rules of convention by which all society is governed. It should not be possible for any one freeholder to erect some vulgar monstrosity as an

advertisement, when by such building he entirely destroys the artistic harmony of the street. There is an ever growing need for a cultured and wide censorship, as liberal as possible, that will prevent the erection of the hideous and purposeless buildings that so often disgrace our streets.”¹

In Paris prizes are given to architects who design the best street façade during the year. The city also makes awards for the best designs for buildings. It remits a part of the street tax to the owners of approved structures.

Water-Fronts and Railway Terminals.

American cities have also neglected to retain possession of their water-fronts. New York has expended hundreds of millions in the repurchase of its harbor front in order to protect its ocean traffic, while Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore have only recently begun to plan for municipal harbors. But, with the exception of a few cities, scarcely a harbor on the Atlantic seaboard has been protected against private exploitation, while from Duluth to Buffalo, on the Great Lakes, the water-frontage is owned almost exclusively by railroads and private interests, which will have to be expropriated by the community if adequate harbor facilities are to be provided for the water traffic of this great inland sea.

Nor have we utilized our water-fronts for recreation or beauty. Boston has its Charles River Basin; New York, Riverside Park; Chicago and Cleveland have preserved a portion of the lake front; but,

¹ *Town Planning, Past, Present and Possible*, p. 256.

generally speaking, the ocean, lake, and river frontage is in the hands of business when it should be the centre of the life of the city as it is in European countries, where the water-fronts have been retained in public hands.

We have also neglected to make provision for transportation facilities and railway terminals. With the exception of New York, Washington, Boston, and two or three other cities, railway approaches are almost universally bad. Stations are inadequate; there are no great union freight terminals; no attempt to unite water and rail traffic. Nor have our cities provided for the proper location of public buildings. There have been no great civic centres, like those of Europe, about which public buildings are grouped.

All these agencies are closely related to the life of the community, and their control and correlation under a definite plan is involved in the art of city planning.

The Beginning of the Planning Movement.

The World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 marks the beginning of city planning in America. People left it with the inquiry: "Why cannot cities be built like a world's fair; why should we not employ architects and artists in their designing; why should we not live in cities as beautiful as this fugitive play city, that will disappear at the end of the summer?" And the men who designed the fair also became interested in the grouping of public buildings, in the control of streets and open spaces, in

the idea of building cities with a vision of the future.

Then it was discovered that America possessed in its capital one of the most completely planned cities in the world. Washington was designed over a century ago. It might have grown as other American cities have grown had it not been for the imagination of the first President, who called to his aid a French military engineer, Peter Charles L'Enfant, who had been with him during the Revolutionary War. L'Enfant visited the capitals of Europe; he studied their streets and open spaces, the location of public buildings, and on his return he laid out Washington as a capital city for a population of 700,000 people.

The Washington Plan.

The Capitol was located on a commanding hill and was connected with the White House by Pennsylvania Avenue. Between the Capitol and the White House grounds a parkway 2,000 feet in width was set aside as the site of future public buildings. This broad mall between the executive and legislative departments of the government was dedicated to departmental buildings, a number of which have already been erected. When completed the mall will be one of the most splendid parkways in the world, flanked on either side by great buildings, and with a view of the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and the expanse of the Potomac River in the distance. The plans reserved the banks of the river for public uses, upon which

parks and an inland water basin have been laid out. Scattered about the city are open spaces and circles which have been developed into small parks. A very large area of land was dedicated to streets and to parkage in front of the houses.

The street system which L'Enfant designed was unique. Under it congestion is impossible. He took the rectangular gridiron plan of Philadelphia and laid across it broad diagonal avenues opening into important civic centres. At the intersection of streets and avenues open spaces were left for gardens and statuary. Civic centres were established about the Capitol, the White House, and elsewhere, which distribute the life of the city to many centres. In this respect Washington is like Paris, London, and Berlin.

The designs of L'Enfant were followed for nearly a century with but slight alterations. In 1903 a Senate committee was appointed to study the future development of the city and decide upon the sites of future public buildings. The commission was composed of leading experts, who visited Europe and on their return reported that the future plans of the city should follow those of L'Enfant; that future public buildings should be located upon the mall, and that but little improvement could be made upon the original design.

Recent Progress in City Planning.

The last ten years have witnessed a wide-spread interest in town planning. Over one hundred cities have entered upon planning projects. They

include New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Columbus, Albany, Rochester, Springfield (Mass.), Denver, Seattle, Kansas City, Detroit, Saint Louis, Hartford, Los Angeles, San Diego, Providence, Saint Paul, Minneapolis, and half a hundred other cities of from 25,000 inhabitants upward. Many of these cities have appointed experts or commissions to prepare plans. Hundreds of millions of dollars are involved in these undertakings, which in many instances have met with the enthusiastic approval of the people.

A national town planning conference has been organized, which has held six annual meetings, while the cities of Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York have held very creditable exhibits of town planning in connection with conferences. There is evidence that the municipal movement in America is on the threshold of a transition, and it is not impossible that the next few years will see the development of a nation-wide movement for the improvement and beautification of our towns.

The Chicago Plan.

City planning involves either the re-planning of old parts of the city or the development of new areas in an orderly way. The first is very costly; the second involves little other outlay than the preparation of the plans.

Chicago has under consideration a colossal programme of city building. It is fairly comparable to the work of Napoleon III in Paris. The total

cost of the plans, which will require years in their completion, runs into hundreds of millions. The project was started by the Commercial Club, which intrusted the plans to Mr. Daniel H. Burnham, an architect of international reputation, and Edward H. Bennett. The plans treat the city as a unit and provide for generations of growth. Michigan Avenue, along the lake front, forms the basis, while at the intersection of South Halsted and West Congress Streets a civic centre is designed like the Place de la Concorde in Paris, to be surrounded by monumental structures dominated by a municipal building whose dome rises high above everything else. Out from the civic centre broad radial avenues are to be cut through the rectangular street system to the suburbs. Opening out into Lake Michigan a circular harbor is designed from which there is to be a commanding view of the public buildings, while for twenty miles along the lake front a parkway is to be built by dumping the city's refuse within piles driven some distance from the shore. The parkway will be separated from the mainland by lagoons, to be used for boating, rowing, and pleasure craft.

Circumferential boulevards are planned in two series which open at intervals into small parks and playgrounds, while far out in the country great woods are to be acquired, like those possessed by the German and Swiss cities. The Chicago plan also includes provision for transit, both steam and electric, including the building of terminals for water

and railway transportation. It also includes the development of docks and harbors. The whole plan covers a radius of sixty miles and includes provision for the growth of the city for many generations to come. Chicago is the only American city to undertake a plan in the big, comprehensive way so common in Germany.

Grouping Public Buildings.

Rulers in every age have taken pride in the adornment of their cities with palaces, cathedrals, and public monuments. And planning in America is for the most part confined to the grouping of public buildings. Cleveland, a city of 700,000 people, has entered on a civic-centre project whose cost is estimated at over \$24,000,000. A large tract of land was purchased, running from the retail business centre to the lake shore. This land was covered by cheap buildings and was relatively inexpensive. A commission of outside architects was employed to plan the location of a union railway-station, county court-house, city hall, public library, and other public structures. The railway-station is to be the city's portal and will open into a broad mall 600 feet wide, running to the centre of the city. From one end a vista of the station is obtained, while from the other the federal building and library appear. The county court-house is located on one side of the station site, the city hall on the other. Public and semi-public buildings are to flank the mall, which is to be adorned with gardens, fountains, and statuary on either side. Be-

hind the union station is a lake-front park, to be devoted to recreation.

Denver has approved designs for a civic centre in the heart of the city, about which several public buildings are to be grouped, while Seattle, Rochester, Saint Louis, Hartford, Springfield (Mass.), and many other cities are planning similar groups as centres of the city's life.

City planning in this country has been generally confused with the city beautiful or limited to parks and boulevards. There has been little thought of the social side of the subject, of planning the city for people, for industry, for transit, for terminals, housing, and the development of suburbs. We have not made provision for factory districts or the segregation of industry. Little has been done for the planning of water-fronts and practically nothing for the control of railways and terminals. There has been little thought of the health of the workers, while play and recreation have been treated as a detached thing. City planning in America has been almost wholly confined to the spectacular. It is not yet the science of city building that it is in Germany.

Beginning of Control.

A committee appointed by the board of estimate and apportionment of New York recently recommended very radical legislation for the correction of these conditions. It urged that all buildings be limited in height to not more than twice the width of the street, with permission, however, for towers

and set-backs of one foot for each two feet in stories above that limit. Special regulations for height, bulk, and open spaces are also suggested as to each separate building district to be established. In planning these districts limitations are to be fixed with regard to the present and probable uses of the territory and are designed with the idea of insuring safety from fire and the promotion of health, adequate light, air, and open spaces. The committee also recommended that the power be given to the city to designate certain districts for industry and others for residences, with power to regulate each district for the purpose of insuring permanence of values therein.

Los Angeles, Cal., has gone further than any other American city in the regulation of land and buildings. The city is divided into industrial and residential sections, with the aim of segregating industry and residences within each of them. All manufacturing is forbidden in the residential districts, although inoffensive business may be carried on therein. The State of Wisconsin has passed an act permitting the cities to set aside exclusive residential districts, as have Minnesota and Illinois. The legality of these laws has been tested in but few cases, but the Los Angeles ordinance, the most radical of any, has been sustained by the courts of California.

The Helplessness of the American City.

One reason for this failure of the American city is to be found in its helplessness. For the powers

of the city are very limited. It cannot control the public service corporations or compel the land speculator to plat his land as the city decrees. Officials are compelled to sit idly by while old abuses are repeated, which will have to be corrected in the future at great cost to the community. Only within limits can the city control the height of buildings or limit the amount of land that may be covered by them. We cannot protect the community from noise or dirt or compel factories to locate in the suburbs. The location of houses, their height and distance from the street, the fixing of a sky-line, all essential to proper city planning, are beyond our control. Nor have we any power over railways; we cannot compel them to provide proper stations. We see great cities like Cleveland and Buffalo powerless to secure decent stations or adequate terminal facilities.

City planning is further impossible by statutory limitations on the city borrowing powers. The tax rate is limited, as is the amount of indebtedness. Cities are unable to carry through needed improvements because of these limitations on their financial powers.

In addition, public opinion, which the law reflects, is very solicitous of the rights of property. We have not yet developed a community sense and have little realization of the necessity of public control. Officials, too, have little experience, while we have not appreciated the necessity for the expert in municipal affairs. At the same time our

cities have no traditions of beauty, there is little local affection. All of these factors contribute to the backwardness of the city-planning movement in this country.

Summary.

City planning has been neglected in America, and in many ways this is our most costly failure. We have neglected to anticipate the city's growth and make provision for its needs. The individualism of American life expresses itself in our cities more prominently than in any other place; it expresses itself in street planning, in building regulations, in the failure to limit the height of buildings and the area to be covered by them. We have also failed to retain our water-fronts, to anticipate transportation and terminal needs and make provision for industry. All of these needs are part of proper city planning.

These failures are largely traceable to our *laissez-faire* philosophy, a philosophy that gave too great sanction to private property and too little power to the community. There was no far-seeing vision of the future, no appreciation of the city as a permanent thing, and no vision of the city as an agency of social welfare.

Within the past ten years the town-planning movement has received a great impetus and gives promise of being the most hopeful municipal movement in the country. During these years civic centres, parks and boulevard systems, the laying out of suburban territory, and the regulation of property in the interest of the community have made substantial progress, in the accomplishment of which scores of cities have employed trained experts in the carry-

ing out of their plans. Just as home rule is the first essential to a free city, so comprehensive town planning is the most important task in the programme of city reclamation.