

# Lessons to Be Learned from Europe

WOLF VON-ECKARDT, Architectural Critic, The Washington Post

•IT was a surprise to meet the bearded minstrels again, lustily strumming their guitars in the shadow of the glass and steel skyscrapers of Sergelgatan, downtown Stockholm's new business center. But West Europe's new architecture has many such surprises. It is far ahead of us in applying the ancient art of urban design to make modern life livable.

I had first encountered the three wandering troubadours—students from England singing their way across the Continent—on Copenhagen's Strøget, a mile-long, meandering shopping street barred to automobiles and returned to people on foot. One almost expects street singers here. The stores are modern, but their design is tastefully blended into a setting which, with its lovingly restored old houses and churches along the narrow street and its open vistas around every bend, is essentially medieval.

But you scarcely expect folk singers in a redeveloped downtown business center atop multi-level underground garages and a gleaming, new subway station. Like the new downtown centers in Coventry, Rotterdam, Warsaw, Kassel and other European cities, Sergelgatan is designed to rescue the soul of the inner city from traffic congestion. Its architecture is perhaps the most exciting—as imposing as Rockefeller Center, the granddaddy of them all, but more bustling and varied.

Five large office towers, identical in bulk but different in their facade treatment, are rhythmically spaced along the car-free mall lined with shops. It's the scale, the intimacy and movement on that mall, as much, I would think, as the cafes, flower beds, potted trees, benches and fountains, that attract the festive crowd even when the stores are closed. It seems to invite the artists who display their paintings or chalk pictures on the pavement. It spontaneously lured our minstrels and, surrounded by an appreciative crowd, they cheerfully seemed to belong. Only this time the girl friends who collected for them were Swedish, of course, not Danish. But they were just as blond and as pretty.

The next day on Sergelgatan the shoppers were serenaded by young Spaniards in black velvet Goya costumes, no less. They passed their berets themselves. In Spain chivalry is not dead.

Neither, in many of the new city centers and new towns of West Europe, is the old market. They are holding their own against the big chain stores with their American check-out counters and the city planners encourage them despite American-size traffic jams and housing problems. In Stockholm the new shopping mall spills right into the colorful old flower and produce market in front of the Concert Hall. Rotterdam has a market. In the brand new town of Wolfsburg, Germany, where the Volkswagen is made, the city planners designed handsome, modern stalls and umbrellas for the market on their new city square. On market day it has much of the delight of the Piazza delle Erbe in Verona. Alvar Aalro's enchanting new cultural center makes as fitting a foil as a 13th century Veronese palace.

In Harlow, one of Britain's eighteen new towns, the vendors use their own stalls and trucks for a traveling market. It's a bit messy. But its very messiness helps this rather drab, machine-made space with its curtain wall structures. The market turns the town center into a real community center. You experience humanity and it is this experience for which, for millennia, people have come together in cities.

The troubadours and the markets are only a part of it. They are delightful results of the design, the creative intention, to build an environment for the enjoyment and community of people rather than merely to let buildings squat where they seem most profitable.

---

Paper sponsored by Department of Urban Transportation Planning.

We say that we plan our cities. In fact we have as many planning boards and commissions and committees as we have bitter and drawn-out public hassles about every new highway, every bridge and every urban renewal plan. We quarrel because we can't resolve our urban conflicts: we set up one agency to control air pollution and another, more powerful one, to bring more cars and carbon monoxide into our settlements. And we still keep tearing down or relocating our markets and turn them into parking lots.

We say that only firm regional planning can save us, but jealous local governments are still proliferating. The Federal Government wants to help save the inner city but spends most of its money helping to push the suburbs even further out. Some Congressmen and local officials wage war against poverty and public housing for the poor at the same time.

These conflicts lead to planning paralysis. Meanwhile, driven by the explosive dynamics of growing economic affluence and population growth, chaotic squatting continues. Our city planners only join the fracas and are powerless anyway. Ask them how they intend to bring order into the city and they will show you computer projections of how the disorder will spread. They draw their pretty colored zoning maps and fill their "green spaces" with no idea how to keep them green or what to do with them.

The specialized planning agencies, wrote Lewis Mumford recently, have done "nothing to counteract the cataclysmic economic forces that are now producing something close to total urban chaos, in which purposeless violence and barefaced criminality and meaningless 'happenings' contradict all the professed boasts of an advancing civilization."

We knew once that you can design cities where young people can sing and where we can experience our humanity when Faneuil Hall in Boston or Jackson Square in New Orleans were built. But then we built an elevated freeway over old Boston and threaten to build one over the French Quarter in New Orleans. We might have rediscovered the joys of good urban design on any sunny afternoon during the past 34 years in Rockefeller Center. And, ironically, the new towns in Britain, Sweden, Finland and elsewhere in Europe would be unthinkable without Radburn, New Jersey.

Designed back in 1928 by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, with people like Lewis Mumford cheering them on, Radburn pioneered the idea of neighborhood clusters and of keeping automobiles in their place. Franklin D. Roosevelt's greenbelt towns of the late thirties echoed this idea. But then we forgot all about it in our postwar rush to suburbia. Now the frightful economic and social penalty of raping the countryside and letting our cities decay has forced us to remember.

Europe never forgot. West Europe has two-thirds more people than the United States who live in an area about one-third as large. It now has the same frightening proliferation of cars and people. The rush hour traffic jams in most of its cities are every bit as bad as ours and the housing shortage is worse. Yet, as you drive around, you always know where one city ends and another begins and there is unspoiled open country in between. European countries, regardless of political system, are effectively planning their expanding communities, transportation systems and the adjustment of their cities to the motor age.

The tradition of urban planning goes back to antiquity and the walled cities of the middle ages. Regional planning began as the Dutch, in the 15th century, started to reconquer their land from the sea. But the simple idea of building new communities instead of letting old ones sprawl out unmanageably and anonymously, started with Ebenezer Howard's "Garden Cities of Tomorrow," published in 1898 in London. It inspired Radburn, and our own new towns—notably Reston, now under construction 18 miles from Washington, D. C., and Columbia, soon to be built between Washington and Baltimore—are based on it. But not every builder development that assumes this suddenly fashionable term is really a new town.

Ebenezer Howard was an English court stenographer and inventor. He proposed to abolish London's slums by moving their inhabitants into completely planned, new communities of limited size surrounded by permanent greenbelts where they would live, work and play in pleasant surroundings. The city slums were to be turned into parks

and the endless growth of London was to be arrested. The idea at once launched a world-wide movement and five years after Howard's book appeared, Letchworth, the first such Garden City, 35 miles from London was underway. Nearby Welwyn followed in 1920. Right after World War II the British passed their New Towns Act and over one million of them now live in planned communities. The government finances the development corporations but private enterprise does most of the building.

The idea, though still valid, has neither entirely abolished the London slums nor has it entirely prevented some urbanization of its surrounding greenbelt. But it has helped. Compared to us, though not the stern Dutch, the British are ahead in the race for a livable environment. And it has focused the skill of their planners and architects on comprehensive community planning. It is fascinating to see how each British new town has learned from the mistakes of the one before it.

Letchworth and Welwyn now appear little different from our own well-established and well-to-do suburban communities like Shaker Heights near Cleveland or Winnetka, near Chicago, although they are much better planned than most of our more recent subdivisions and they provide employment in their own neatly tucked away industries.

Harlow, 23 miles from London, which was staked out in 1947 and now has a working class population of over 60,000, most of which is employed in the town, has mainly the market to recommend it. Again, by American standards, the town is attractive. The row houses form pleasant streets and the clusters allow intimate courts. There are handsome sculptures everywhere. The overhead wiring and ugly poles that ruin the appearance of even our most attractive subdivisions are buried.

But no troubadours would venture there. "Jolly nice," just about sums up the local pride. "You can get just as lonely here as anywhere else," a red-headed young dental assistant told me. "Why just the other day an old lady was found dead in her flat. She'd been dead for three days, they say. And the milk kept standing outside her door but no one took notice. Now that's not neighborly like, is it?"

Old ladies die lonely in crowded London, too, of course, but Harlow, I'm afraid, suffers from an overdose of Ebenezer Howard's Thoreauvian passion for Mother Nature which most of our planners still share. The posters, promising £5 rewards for information leading to the arrest of vandals, may have something to do with the enormous, vacant and rather unkempt green spaces that spread the town apart. All the jolly nice clubs and activities, particularly for the Beatle topped youngsters, can't quite overcome these unneighborly distances. They certainly lead to more and more motor traffic and larger and larger parking lots, now that everyone is beginning to own cars. Few residents can walk to the town center.

Basildon, built a few years later, is already more compact, more urbane—no £5 rewards here. Its town center, with a towering apartment building on stilts and a gushing fountain with a sensuous statue, is downright dramatic. The kids are all over the statue.

And in Cumbernauld, not far from Glasgow, Britain's latest new town, the whole thing is, or rather will be, sheer, wonderful drama. Cumbernauld was conceived in 1958 by Hugh Wilson and others and will be completed in 1980. Here the Garden City has yielded to an urban community. Three-quarters of the ultimately 70,000 residents will live within one-third of a mile of the center. There'll be apartments near the heart of town, but most people will live in two and three story townhouses, ingeniously stacked, like ancient Mediterranean towns, on fairly steep hills. Everyone will have both privacy and sunlight, yet no one looks into the other fellow's garden.

There is a complete separation of cars and people. You amble undisturbed on a network of turning and twisting walkways with schools and neighborhood stores along the way. They double as "linear playgrounds," as the planners call them. There are fences to rattle sticks on as the children run along them. There are low walls to walk, sit and climb on. There are courts and protected gullies—paved with cobblestone since lawns turn muddy in Scotland's wet climate—equipped with marvelous play sculptures. Open space is put to work. It becomes meaningful.

Yet the automobile is far from neglected. It can go nearly everywhere on separate roads and there is parking for one car per family either below its house or in nearby garages. You will drive right under the town center, a single citadel with the library,

community center, medical services, offices, stores, a hotel, bank and penthouse apartment atop the towers. You get up by elevators, escalator ramps and stairs to the landscaped plazas and terraces. Leonardo da Vinci, nearly five hundred years ago, sketched visions of such a city where all transportation moves in underground tunnels, leaving man free to enjoy the sun. Built on a hill, Cumbernauld's town center will be surrounded by a meadow. There'll be sheep grazing on it, the planners promise.

The promise of Cumbernauld has already had a profound influence on urban design everywhere. Finland's no less influential new town, Tapiola, however, is already an enchanting accomplishment. "What are we to do with our prosperity?" is how its initiator, Heikki von Hertzen, a slim, quick, no-nonsense man, began explaining it to me. "We can't eat more. There's a limit to the automobiles and gadgets we really need. That's why I am persuading my countrymen that we should build a more beautiful, healthier environment for everyone to live in. We must do away with the stresses and strains of polluted cities and monotonous suburbs."

We talked in his office on the eleventh floor of Tapiola's central office tower. Six miles away, beyond gently rolling forests and the cold blue of the Gulf, where the sky is dimmer, you see the steeples of Helsinki. Immediately below, shooting out like mushrooms among the trees and rocks and richly varied in their crisp, modern architecture, are Tapiola's townhouses and apartment buildings. They casually group themselves around the water, clustered in three villages or neighborhoods. "Tapio" is the name of a Finnish forest sprite. You sense his presence.

Von Hertzen, formerly director of a welfare agency, brought welfare organizations, women's clubs and labor unions together to build Tapiola as a non-profit venture. Interest rates are higher than in the United States. Yet despite the outstanding architecture, the result of an architectural competition, well lighted sidewalks, beautiful landscaping and other amenities American suburbs don't even dream of, rents are below those in Helsinki. "It's all a matter of good design and good management," says von Hertzen.

In contrast to Cumbernauld's tight, Italian hilltown cluster, Tapiola may come closer to what American real estate agents tout as "gracious living." But there are differences, deeper and more important than the absence of carriage lamps on the doors. Like most new towns, Tapiola's neighborhoods each have their school, small cafe, and store for essentials. But you can also walk to the town with its rather sophisticated stores and services of all kinds. The office tower beckons from all directions. Mothers can take baby along. "Our town is planned in perambulator distances," said von Hertzen.

People of various income groups live together on the same streets and you can never tell on the outside which of the houses and apartment buildings received the forty percent government subsidy for low income housing. The ultimate population is 17,000 and half of them will work there. All share the convenience of a central plant that supplies heat and hot water along with the abundant libraries, playgrounds, sports and other things. There are even soft drink bars for the teenagers and workshops where they build model airplanes or tinker with hotrods. There are special studios for artists.

Yet there is as much privacy as there is community. It is, on the contrary, the unplanned agglomerations of dwellings in most American suburbs that regiment us. Our gracious living, according to a recent real estate page news story, means "smartly improved ranch homes packed with new appliances and fixtures . . . step-saving kitchens with hand-rubbed, wood cabinets and glass-fronted wall oven" and whatnot. The miles of ranch homes are as alike as the people in them. No one saves us steps to the distant shopping centers or the children's music lessons. We can look at the roast, but what do we see outside the window?

Von Hertzen was too polite to ask what it is we do with our prosperity.

We have built our affluent, new homes better and more comfortable than the Europeans. But the quality of our civilization, as President Johnson said in his State of the Union message, "cannot realize its full promise in isolation . . . . In our urban areas the central problem today is to protect and restore man's satisfaction in belonging to a community where he can find security and significance."

"A community must offer added dimensions to the possibilities of daily life," Mr. Johnson elaborated in his message to Congress on cities. "It must meet the indi-

vidual's most pressing need and provide places for recreation and for meeting with neighbors." He advocated Federal inducements for effective metropolitan planning, and financial assistance for the advance acquisition of land to plan and build new towns.

Private enterprise already has two under way. Reston, largely financed by the Gulf Oil Company, and Columbia, financed by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, promise much of the architectural charm and perhaps even more of the amenities of Cumbernauld and Tapiola. But Federal help will be needed to assure America's new towns of the necessary employment centers so people can stay put instead of cluttering the highways. And only Federal help can assure that they include homes for people of modest income to break down the walls of our downtown racial ghettos and our class conscious, social arteriosclerosis.

Nor can we neglect urban renewal to reinvigorate the heart of the city. We've done better here. The new Southwest in Washington is on the way of becoming an attractive community. Constitution Plaza in Hartford, Connecticut, is a beautifully designed breath of fresh air in the city. But lacking shops and movement, it is more of a garden for the surrounding office buildings than an urban plaza that might attract wandering troubadours. There is more hope for them in Boston's new Government Center or Baltimore's Charles Center when they are finished, provided the police don't arrest them for loitering. Only in Fresno, California, where six downtown blocks have been closed off to automobiles and furnished with benches, greenery, sculpture and fountains, have we so far allowed the fun of street life to return on an appreciable scale.

But it can't be done by just keeping cars off some streets. European city planners saw the tide coming twenty years ago. Stockholm's Sergelgatan is possible because the city, immediately after the war, made a superb, modern subway system the backbone of its masterplan. It is a joy to ride. Each of the new, cheerful stations is designed by a different artist in different colors and materials and serves as something of a neighborhood center. At the end of each line, you arrive not in amorphous suburbia, but in the charming and bustling center of a compact satellite town. You can quarrel with some of the architecture of Vallingby and Farsta and the others. The design of the pavements, the enchanting playgrounds everywhere, the landscaping, the advertising display cases, the orientation maps and signs, the trash baskets, the lettering on the stores, the benches and all the other details American city builders keep neglecting, make these towns works of art, a harmonious manifestation of a modern visual culture.

Stockholm's subways carry three-quarters of the rush-hour traffic. Like the subways in twelve European cities they are still being expanded. But our highway lobby needn't worry. With one out of four Swedes now owning private cars, the highways are being expanded too, and there are still traffic jams.

Stockholm could properly plan its growth without the pains of sprawl, billboards and ugliness because back at the beginning of the century its city fathers had the wisdom to buy up miles of surrounding land. Oddly enough, even the socialist countries in Europe, with the exception of France, are reluctant to condemn existing buildings, except hopeless slums, for urban renewal and large-scale development as we do. We, on the other hand, are reluctant even to purchase, let alone use the power of "eminent domain," for undeveloped, outlying land to assure orderly expansion.

But the main difference between community building on the two continents is not in the method but in the general approach. We could always move further west and therefore never took planning very seriously and still don't, except for property values and highway interests. The Europeans have long been forced to make their limited space livable.

The heart of Rotterdam was still smoldering after the Luftwaffe's savage, senseless bombing in May 1940 and the air was reeking with smoke and burned corpses. The Municipal Library was one of the few buildings spared. And there, bent over maps and drawing paper was the city architect, W. G. Witteveen, planning a new Rotterdam, efficient, fair and proud. Other notable architects, particularly J. H. van den Broek and Jacob Bakema, joined the clandestine effort at the constant peril of being discovered by the Gestapo. As soon as Holland was free, the Dutch government in exile in England appropriated the rubble so that all rebuilding would conform to the masterplan. The

owners were compensated only after the new buildings were completed. They received the added satisfaction of living and working in surroundings where modern is also human and delightful.

The planning for the reconstruction of Warsaw, in fact of all of Poland, also began in secret while Nazi war and destruction were still going on. Chief city architect, Stanislaw Jankowski, managed to escape German captivity to England. He was trained at the Liverpool planning school and parachuted back into Poland where he organized an underground group of planners and architects. "We even issued degrees," he told me. And currently Polish urban designers are winning international competitions all over Europe. Communist architects, for instance, won the competition for the new opera house in Fascist Madrid.

Though construction is shoddy, the overall plan of the new Warsaw, its housing projects and particularly the new downtown center show this design excellence. The new downtown skyscrapers, similar to Sergelgatan, contrast oddly with Stalin's horrible wedding cake Palace of Culture across the street that everyone, including Jankowski, openly jokes about. The city is ready for the automobile invasion, bound to come when the economy improves, as will the already planned subway. Most of Warsaw's homes already get their heat and hot water piped in from two electric power plants along the Vistula. Along with the convenience this, of course, also reduces air pollution.

"We have over a million city planners here," said Jankowski. "Everybody but the babies helped rebuild the city so everyone argues what should be built and how." Jankowski appears on television once a week to help the city planning discussions along. Once a year there is a city-wide contest for the most popular new building from a slate proposed by architects.

Comprehensive city and regional planning may be easier in a Communist country, where the state simply won't produce more cars, for instance, until the roads and parking garages are ready. But the democratic countries in West Europe, too, give their planners authority to make their planning effective. Here we don't trust planning and allow the planners only to advise the city fathers who seldom listen. And we have separate agencies for public housing, urban renewal, highways, schools, sanitation and the like who rarely speak to each other except to quarrel. In Europe all this is under one administrative roof in city hall and a part of politics, a word derived from the art of managing the affairs of the city or polis. If you don't like what the planners do, you can vote the rascals out.

Their work, to be sure, is somewhat easier than here. People, on the Continent at least, like cities and their concentrated variety of people and activities. No one finds it scandalous if public funds are spent on enhancing public buildings or if a city like Hannover, for instance, spends six percent of its budget on enhancing its streets and squares with well maintained flower beds and trees.

West Europe, although its agriculture is also becoming increasingly more efficient, keeps more people on the farm. One of our great urban problems is that, while we spend little on our cities where nearly three-quarters of our people live, we spend a great deal on our farmers. The farm subsidies speed mechanization which forces farm workers to seek jobs in the cities that often aren't there. In the past 25 years 18 million farm laborers have swelled our downtown ghettos. And despite what Mumford calls "the insensate dynamism of our affluent society" with all its bulldozing and constructing, we have done precious little to make them at home in the city. We have built housing and highways but not communities.

Before you can build you must plan. And before you can plan you must have a concept of what you want and what the community is to be. This cannot be done with abstractions like zoning maps and engineering charts and electronic computations, as our planners attempt it. In Europe it is easy to visualize what is to come of all the digging and building and how the city is to grow. You go to city hall and almost inevitably you will find a scale model of the entire city. On the model and the supporting three-dimensional exhibits you see the whole organism—the arteries and veins of transportation, the industrial muscle, the breathing lungs of parks, plazas and playgrounds and all the other things which make the cells of human habitation throb with life. You see

how high buildings and the low, the important and the humble ones and the waters and hills of the city all relate to each other. You see the city as a unit and how it will grow. Made to the same scale, proposed new buildings and projects can simply be put into the city model and everyone can visualize how it will work out.

Philadelphia is one of the few American cities that has such a scale model at least for its center. As in Europe, people study and discuss it and they bring the school children to show them what's happening to their community. It is no coincidence, I believe, that the renewal of Philadelphia is considered among the best urban designs this side of the Atlantic.

There are a great many things we must do before street singers will again entertain us on the streets of our cities, before, as President Johnson put it, the American city is again "a place where each individual's self-respect is strengthened by the respect and affection of his neighbors."

But first of all, as in Philadelphia, we should build and display comprehensive scale models of our cities so we all are able to see what we are doing. Building livable communities in the existing city and in the suburbs should become our national hobby.