

## THE TOWN-PLANNING MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

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Some appreciation of the possibilities and advantages of town planning has been current in America from early colonial times. The very act of founding a new settlement in the wilderness emphasized both the solidarity of the community—the dependence of the individual upon the success of the town as a whole—and also the importance of planning not merely to meet the temporary circumstances but rather those of the expected future town conceived in the imagination.

It is the combination of these two ideas which constitutes the town planning point of view, as distinguished on the one hand from that of the separate uncoordinated planning of the several fragments that make up a town, and on the other hand from that of living from hand to mouth without any deliberate and far-seeing plans at all.

Unfortunately, the conditions of frontier life at the same time made enormous demands upon the energy of the settlers for meeting their immediate necessities. As a practical result, in those communities where the initiative and control were vested in the settlers themselves, as at Boston, Hartford and New Amsterdam, the time and attention which the people actually devoted to planning for the remoter future seem to have been nearly as scanty as in the later period of more settled and stable conditions, when the possibilities of town planning became less obvious and imagination less active. In the case of settlements where the initiative and control were centralized in proprietors, especially non-resident proprietors, the claims of town planning were not so driven to the wall by the pressure of immediate necessities; and we have in William Penn's Philadelphia plan of 1682 an example of deliberate planning for a town of large size with systematic provision for the streets, public recreation grounds, public market places and wharves required by a population considerably greater than was to be expected within a single generation. It was only a more notable example of a sort of planning of "fiat" towns that has been by no means uncommon throughout our history. Of course, the most conspicuous example of this type, the one planned with the

most liberal estimate of future growth and needs, and upon the whole the best of them all, was Washington, planned in the last decade of the eighteenth century.

Leaving Washington aside, most of our prosperous towns comparatively soon outgrew any plan they may have had at the start and, without the dramatic stimulus to the imagination given by the act of founding a wholly new settlement, it was very seldom indeed that any effective effort was made to face the problems of extension and growth in the town planning spirit.

The town planning movement, as a distinct, self-conscious activity with a literature of its own, is very recent in America. A glance through the titles assembled under this head in the Library of Congress shows only scattering items before 1890, a considerable output during the last decade of the nineteenth century, and quite a river of publications, both fugitive and permanent, bearing dates since 1900. This river is composed of a number of streams of varied origin and character still running side by side without quite losing their identity, and for the most part traceable through independent courses far back of 1890. I can only point out a few of the important landmarks along these converging lines.

Throughout our history, in towns which were outgrowing the effective capacity of their permanent facilities for the transaction of business, especially the capacity of their streets and other parts of the transportation system, the planning of extensions and improvements has been of two kinds, private and collective. The street extensions, with rare exceptions, have been privately planned by or for the owners of land, to afford local means of access to lots, with varying degrees of intelligence as to purely local interests and with only occasional regard for the needs of the community in respect to main thoroughfares. Where the growth was most rapid, in the two cities of New York and Philadelphia, the inevitable defects of private street platting first became conspicuous and first led to strong constructive public action. A brief review of public planning in those two cities will indicate the solid foundations of the recent popular movement.

An act of the colonial assembly of February 24, 1721, provided for "surveyors and regulators" to establish streets and building lines in Philadelphia. The number of these officials was increased both in Philadelphia and the adjacent municipalities and their duties gradu-

ally broadened till the consolidation act of February 2, 1854, which created the department of surveys covering the enlarged city of 129 square miles. This was divided into twelve survey districts, each in charge of a "surveyor and regulator," who together formed the board of surveyors under the presidency of the chief engineer and surveyor of the city. This board, with its predecessors and its successor, the bureau of surveys, has had drastic powers of initiative and control in planning new streets, and I think I am right in saying that Philadelphia is the only American city in which, until recent years, such a permanent representative of the community has exercised a dominant and continuous control over the development of the street system. Its duties have covered the planning of sewers and bridges, but it has not had the authority or until very recently assumed the duty of taking part in any planning for the location of parks or of lands needed for other public functions, or the duty of considering the intimately related problem of facilities for rail and water transportation.

Comprehensive planning in New York proceeded until much later upon the spasmodic method of a "once for all" plan without provision for systematic revision and extension. The celebrated act of April 4, 1807, created a temporary commission of three, with power to lay out streets, roads and public squares. In many respects the plan of these commissioners was a bad one, and it is the fashion, in view of the enormous growth of New York, to belittle their conception of the problem that faced them. In fact, they had a remarkably broad outlook. They felt it necessary to apologize in their report for having provided for a population "larger than was anywhere gathered together in one place this side of China;" and at a time long before the extraordinary urban development of the nineteenth century had proved the need of systematic provision for public outdoor recreation in cities, they interpreted their authority to lay out "public squares" so liberally that during the next three generations shortsighted and selfish land owners were kept busy in procuring the passage at Albany of successive special acts, curtailing and omitting the public open spaces they had provided.

It seems extraordinary with the rapid growth of other American towns, with the example of Philadelphia, and with the less admirable but suggestive example of New York, that comprehensive official planning, at least of the streets, should not have made more rapid

headway. Landmarks in that line of progress are the Boston board of survey act of 1891 and the Baltimore topographical bureau ordinance of 1893, both of which were similar in essentials to the Philadelphia scheme. The failure to cope with the problem earlier is presumably chargeable to the general weakness and corruption of municipal government in America during the nineteenth century.

In New York, parallel with the history of the plan of the commissioners of 1807, there was early created a tolerably strong municipal control of the development of the commercial water front and the adjacent streets through a permanent city department which has from time to time taken a broad view of its duty to plan for the water terminals of the city as a whole, has brought a large proportion of the water front under municipal ownership, and has recently risen to a clear conception of the relation between the water terminals and the railroad terminals as parts of one great transportation unit. Until very recently practically all other American cities, with the exception of river ports which maintained public wharves along the levees, left the development of water terminals to private initiative, under such control as the federal government might exercise in the interest of general navigation.

Sewerage and water supply have been dealt with by New York, and by most other American cities so far as they have faced them squarely as municipal duties at all, as distinct problems, planned independently of any planning for streets or other features of the city, accepting the latter as fixed factors so far as they were definitely determined and ignoring their probable future extensions and changes. Essential as the elements of water supply, sewerage and drainage are to any comprehensive city plan, the planning of them runs on today in many places almost independent of other city planning work, and has had little influence on what is commonly known as the town planning movement.

There is another element of the physical city, the public importance of which began to loom up much later than those mentioned above, not, in fact, until the latter half of the nineteenth century, but which has played a very decided part in the development of town planning. I cannot here undertake even to sketch the history of the modern public parks movement. After a surprisingly brief public discussion, about 1850, the people of New York City made up their minds to have an adequate park, and owing to the bad polit-

ical situation in the city, a state board, called the commissioners of the Central Park, was created to carry the idea into effect. The work of the board was rapid, efficient and popular, and the creation of the park stimulated people's imagination as to the entire subject of the city's development, especially on the esthetic side. The commission and its landscape architects set forth the desirability of other park developments in upper Manhattan and of connecting thoroughfares of a more or less parklike character. At the same time, the growth of the city was beginning at a few places to reach toward the limits of the plan of 1807. In 1860 the Central Park Commissioners were authorized to prepare a plan for the city north of 155th street, with powers like those of the commission of 1807. This was in effect what should have been done many years before, placing upon a permanent board the duty of revising and extending the city plan. Subsequent enactments gave them power to alter and develop the plan in certain other parts of Manhattan Island, and in 1869 the powers were enlarged and extended over Westchester County to the Yonkers city line, and they were given an absolute veto power over practically all public improvements in that district pending the completion of their general plans. Their duties were specifically made to include the design, not only of streets, public squares and places, but sewerage, drainage, water-supply, the improvement of the Harlem River, etc., and bridges, tunnels and means of transit across and under the same.

Chapter 534 of the acts of 1871, continuing these town planning powers in the department of public parks, successor of the Central Park Commission, is important, because it added the duty of planning for railroads "and similar modes of communication and transportation," and also for pier and bulkhead lines. I believe this is the first instance, at least in America, of the official recognition that the planning of railroads is an essential part of the planning of a large city; and the preliminary plan for main thoroughfares in the twenty-third and twenty-fourth wards of New York, prepared under that act by the writer's father and J. R. Croes, which showed not only highways but a system of rapid transit railroads free from grade crossings with the streets, is the earliest city plan I know that squarely attempts to deal with the bigger transportation problems of a city from the public point of view. Up to that time, and for a good many years after, the planning of street railways and rapid transit lines,

as well as of the terminals of long-distance railroads, was done almost wholly by the concerns engaged in operating these public services, little if any in advance of the time when extensions were demanded by increase of traffic and under the handicap of accepting a layout of streets designed without regard to rail transportation and very ill adapted to the purpose.

This plan for upper New York was lost to view in subsequent shifts of administrative authority and in compromises with local interests, but is none the less a great landmark in the development of town planning. It marks a point in respect to planning suburban areas which has not yet been fairly reached in this era of public service commissions and popular interest in the subject.

Out of the town planning work of the New York park department grew the establishment of the commissioner of street improvements of the twenty-third and twenty-fourth wards, in 1891, and out of that, under the charter of 1897 for greater New York, a bureau charged with the completion of the plan of the entire city at least in regard to the streets and parks, a duty which was partitioned in 1902 by a new charter among five separate bureaus for the several boroughs.

From the period of the '60s and '70s, when the minds most influential in this city-planning work were those of Andrew H. Green and Frederick Law Olmsted, there was a narrowing of the conception of city planning in New York, in which a loss of regard for the esthetic aspect of the work was but one element. There was, however, an apparent gain, at the time of the great consolidation, in bringing the entire territory of the city under the jurisdiction of the planning agency. Another turn of the wheel, in December 1903, brought forward a temporary additional commission that was charged with the staggering duty of preparing in one year a "comprehensive plan for the improvement of New York City;" and that made a report, dated December 14, 1904, in which the esthetic element was as clearly over-emphasized as it had been under-emphasized in the current routine planning.

While the park movement that sprang from Central Park, so far as concerns its immediate local influence on city planning in New York, thus spent its force during the '70s and '80s without accomplishing all that it once promised to do, its influence upon the rest of the country was widespread and powerful. Public parks were

undertaken very generally; and particularly in Boston, to which Mr. Olmsted removed in 1880, the conception of a comprehensive system of inter-related parks, parkways and local recreation grounds was rapidly developed. The first local recreation ground, equipped with running track, apparatus, field houses and trained attendants, was developed in Boston in the '80s, and slowly the idea took root elsewhere, bringing forth its most notable fruit in Chicago some twenty years later. In 1892, Charles Eliot's conception of acquiring for the public of a metropolitan community a great system of large outlying reservations took form in Boston, suggested by a study of the accidental availability of state and royal forests and large outlying commons around Paris and London, just as the acquirement of interior city parks had been largely suggested to an earlier generation by the smaller royal parks that happened to have been engulfed by the growth of London.

Throughout the same half-century, while the park movement was spreading, the group of landscape architects which it had developed was also influencing town planning through numerous suburban land subdivisions designed for private companies, in which deliberate effort was made to secure and maintain attractive and picturesque conditions for suburban life. At the same time there had been an enormous development in the numbers and in the skill of architects, with a corresponding improvement in the artistic standards of building, and in the influence of the architectural profession. The idea of applying deliberate design, by skilled designers, with a view to securing a maximum combination of convenience and beauty in the surroundings of daily life, was becoming widely familiar. Municipal affairs, on account of their generally unsatisfactory condition in the midst of general progress, were drawing a constantly greater amount of intelligent study. The political, the economic and the esthetic problems of municipal work were vigorously discussed by many organizations formed in the late nineteenth century of which the National Municipal League, the American Park and Outdoor Art Association, later merged in the American Civic Association, and the Municipal Art Association and Architectural League of New York City were leading examples. During the same period a group of effective writers upon these and kindred subjects began to increase the literature of town planning very rapidly.

On the artistic side, the Chicago fair of 1893 was an immense



stimulus to this popular movement. Soon after this Glen Brown, in preparing his history of the United States capitol, rediscovered, as it were, L'Enfant's original plan of Washington, certain architecturally striking features of which had been entirely lost to view, and he brought the plan as a whole to public attention. The time was ripe for its appreciation as a great work of constructive design, and in turn it further stimulated the interest, especially of architects and landscape architects, in town-planning matters. The American Institute of Architects devoted their convention at Washington, in the hundredth year after the establishment of the seat of government there, to the plan of Washington. The rapid growth of the city had forced Congress to provide, in the early '90s, for the extension of the street plan beyond the original limits of Washington, for which purpose an organization with powers like the Philadelphia bureau of surveys was created; and in 1902 a committee of experts appointed by the senate committee on the District of Columbia made a report upon desirable improvements in the park system of the district, including the development of the neglected central portion of L'Enfant's plan. This report, while dealing with only a very limited part of town planning, had a wide and powerful influence, and may be regarded as the parent of a long series of local reports during the following decade, touching upon town-planning subjects with a strong tendency to emphasis on the esthetic side, especially on parks and the grouping of public buildings in "Civic Centers."

Three more important sources of the present town-planning movement must be mentioned even in this brief sketch.

At the time when the New York park department was working upon the plans of the northern part of the city, with a conception of town planning at least a whole generation in advance of the public opinion of the day, the Prussian government adopted a law enforcing comprehensive city planning in many German cities. They went at it in a systematically thorough German fashion, and planned themselves up to the hilt. In some respects they did it very badly, as people are apt to do when set to work designing things by main force instead of in response to a need felt by themselves. But as the time went on, the cities not only of Prussia but of other German states, which adopted the method, learned by experience and study, and they accumulated an immense store of valuable information, literature and examples. All this could not but have some influence on America



when interest in the subject grew keen, and its influence has been powerful during the last fifteen years. The influence of other European countries has been considerable, especially that of France through the popular impression of Paris and other French cities on American travelers and through the powerful influence of French schooling upon our architects. In England town planning began to come into its own hardly as soon as it did in America, and did so largely as the result of the German example held up to view by housing reformers and others interested primarily in the social and economic aspects of town planning. Its growth there has been vigorous and healthy and sane, and the recent English influence on the movement in America has tended to overcome a passing excess of emphasis upon the more superficial esthetic aspects of the subject.

Another and stronger influence in the same direction has been that of our own housing reformers and social workers, to whom was mainly due the calling of the first national conference on city planning in Washington, in 1909. They are absolutely right in their contention that town planning should first regard the total influence of what is proposed upon the character of dwelling in which the ordinary citizen will live and upon the immediate surroundings of that dwelling, and only second the economy and perfection of the facilities for those public functions that affect the citizen less intimately.

Finally, during the last twenty years the conviction has steadily grown that the entire apparatus for rail transportation in a city—street railways, rapid transit lines, and the so-called terminal facilities by which long-distance railroads exchange passengers and freight with the local transportation services and shippers—should be developed comprehensively as one enormous complex machine in the interest of the whole community which it serves, regardless of the subdivision of agencies employed to construct and operate the parts; and that the planning of the parts of this vast machine should not be left wholly to those representing independent groups of stockholders in the diverse operating companies. Among the fruits of this growing conviction are the public service commissions, the active participation of municipal officials aided by expert transportation engineers in the final shaping of plans advanced by public service companies, and a considerable number of studies in the constructive planning of such facilities undertaken on their own initiative by representatives of the public. One of the most notable of the

latter in its comprehensive character, although not as yet in its practical results, is the report of George R. Wadsworth to the metropolitan improvements commission of Boston in 1909; but the tendency is shown in a series of reports on the traction situation of many cities by B. J. Arnold and other experts.

The rapid growth of the town-planning movement as such is strikingly indicated by the number of official commissions on the city plan, or official bodies bearing some closely similar title, which have recently been created in the United States, as follows: Hartford in 1907; Chicago in 1909; Baltimore and Detroit in 1910; Jersey City, Newark, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Salem, Mass., and Lincoln, Neb., in 1911; Trenton, N.J., in 1912; and Cincinnati, O., Scranton, Pa., Schenectady, N. Y., Paducah and Louisville, Ky., Lawrence, Pittsfield, Fitchburg, Waltham, Lowell, Springfield, Northampton, Malden and Adams, Mass., and New Haven, New London and Bridgeport, Conn., in 1913.

If the above general account of the town-planning movement in America is fragmentary and confused, it but partially reflects the multiplicity of the currents which have been converging to form that movement and which are surely destined to combine more firmly and with better balance toward the realization of the purpose that impels them all, the making of our cities more convenient, economical and agreeable for the millions that work and live in them.