

THE SPREADING CITY

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Moses¹ describe una realidad válida desde entonces: La tendencia a lo urbano es un hecho, que implica también el consumo del paisaje lejano (de que habla Ribas y Piera), en ello los flujos ciudad-campo están servidos.

Cree en la ciudad, en la permanencia de ésta como único lugar de desarrollo de la civilización, a pesar de los avatares de la historia o la intolerancia hacia su congestión de los que planifiquen, viendo mucho más problemática la imprevisión del 'planeamiento' del suburbano del que algunas de las causas que expone son de total actualidad.

Equivocado o no en su valoración tan positiva de la 'unificación' campo – ciudad (y en la forma física a que tradujo sus ideas), es certero al enunciar no sólo hechos y problemas sino también expectativas de lo que entendemos por una mayor calidad urbana:

“La ambición de cualquier oficial responsable de la reconstrucción y mejora de las ciudades está en incrementar los espacios libres, reducir la ocupación del terreno, salvar, restaurar y preservar los recursos naturales”.

The urban trend, whether we like it or not, is undeniable. The shift from country to town is steady. There is little wavering in the graph but, like all statistics, these require both definition and honest interpretation.

The country is, of course, the area marked in green on the maps, whether wide open or thinly populated. The town—that is another matter. The town is not only the city in the legal sense but the large village as well, whether incorporated or not, the township in some areas, the metropolis in others. In measuring the

* MOSES, R.- “The Spreading City” en *Working for the People: Promise and Performance in Public Service*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1956.

¹ Robert Moses desarrolla su carrera pública desde comienzos de la década de 1910 hasta finales de la de 1960, entre otros cargos como influyente Comisario de Parques de New York.

trend toward the more compact, populous places, we must remember that as people move into cities many in the same cities move into the outskirts, the suburbs and the satellite towns.

Besides those who move from place to place because of their work, an astonishing number of people have homes in town and in the country. They divide their time about equally between an apartment in town and a house, camp or shack of some kind elsewhere. We have millions of city people of all income brackets who spend every weekend in the country and others who have made a habit of regular visits to national and state parks.

The city man is a weekend salt-water fisherman by instinct. He requires something unpaved, unencumbered, and monotonous to keep him sane. Perhaps it is an admission against interest to say that there are many of us who simply cannot take the city the week around. Our parkways, turnpikes, expressways, thruways and other roads, which are being multiplied and improved to keep pace with the output of cars and the demands of the travelling public, will increase enormously the pressure on our highway system and promote mutual attraction and gradual unification of the country and the town.

Meanwhile, the healthy, natural movement of young couples with growing families to houses and apartments at moderate prices in outlying areas of the city and in the suburbs has been accelerated. No compulsion, no artificial stimulus is needed to drive people out of town.

Prejudice and population shifts

Increasing leisure, longer paid vacations, larger pensions, earlier retirement, older people with the itch for travel and with unsatisfied curiosity about distant places break down more and more the artificial differences between the city man and the country man. The big question is whether the traveler seeks to broaden his horizons or to confirm his prejudices.

We should not pay too much attention to the dweller in the shadow of the "El" who would rather be a lamppost in Chicago than the whole Painted Desert. Or to the confirmed Gothamite who boasts that the city is the finest summer resort and that, as Mr. Dooley remarked: "Ivrything that's worth havin' goes to th' city; the counthry takes what's left." And by the same token, keep in mind that Thoreau spent only a relatively short time continuously in his crude shack at Walden Pond. There is no sense in assuming irreconcilable conflict between city and country people. We are not neatly divided between hayseeds and slickers. Acres have claims as well as concentrations of people, but there are no provable superior virtues attaching to the country or city when moral, spiritual, mental, or even health and hygienic factors are under consideration.

Cities were in many cases originally created for protection. This is about the only logic of urban growth which is no longer significant. All the other reasons for the establishment of growing cities are as influential today as they were when the pioneers founded them on the seaboard, the river, the valley, the hill, the rail center, the crossroads, the focal point of a farming, mining, fishing, manufacturing or other center, or the source of plentiful labor.

Academic planners and those who cannot stand urban competition or tolerate a certain amount of noise, tension, hurry, and the anonymity of urban life, advocate decentralization of cities and dispersion of population. But their prejudices will not materially influence the logic of the situation. There are good reasons why most cities persist. Those which decline do so because they no longer serve a function in the larger economy of the nation.

Some advantages of concentration

It is not to be forgotten that civilization is an outgrowth and attribute of cities. Farms produce food; oceans support commerce; the suburbs are dormitories; the mines teem with energy and the forests with the solitude which promotes thought-but civilization flourishes only in concentrated urban communities. You need not to live in a city, but you must be nearby or visit now and then if you expect to be recognized as a civilized man. A city needs not to be large but a village is not a city. To quote the lines of Vachel Lindsay:

Let not your town be large, remembering
That little Athens was the muses' home,
That Oxford is the heart of London still,
That Florence gave the Renaissance to Rome.

On the building of Springfield

The American is restless and imitative. He likes contrast, change and assembly-line stuff. I believe it was Henry Mencken who described him sourly as an Elk in a Ford. Well, ours may not be a great civilization as measured by philosophers. It is no Cinque-Cento Italian Renaissance when it comes to aristocracy of the arts, but it has its points. This is the one nation on earth in which the average man can also be the well-rounded man with two residences, one in town and the other in the country. You do not have to be a millionaire here to own a flivver and a country bungalow.

A proper reading of history shows that the permanence of cities is more significant than their decay. War and the acts of God have from time to time outraged them, but those which were established at navigable waters, at important crossroads and centers, strategic places of one kind or another, persist.

A one-industry town may dry up with its only attraction, but this is the exception not the rule. For every Auburn which fades as its bold peasantry declines, there is a Birmingham which still flourishes. Ol' Man River—Mississippi, Danube or Columbia- keeps on rolling along and most of the cities he has spawned on his banks still flourish. A city cannot live on Tyrian purple, or the sale of graven images of Diana, or on depleted mines, honkytonks or rundown aristocracy; but London, Stalingrad, Amsterdam rise from rubble because they were and continue to be the logical and traditional places for concentration and because they continue to have the men, the enterprise and the pride to keep up with or ahead of the times.

The trouble with the prophets of doom of cities is that they do not think like the people who live in them. Lewis Mumford, Frank Lloyd Wright and their

followers who damn urbanization because they cannot stand the gaff of city life no doubt honestly believe that all city people hate their existence. They do not realize that Brooklynites adore Brooklyn, idolize the Dodgers because they symbolize it, and cheer themselves hoarse at the mention of its name. Can Mumford and the aesthetes, and Frank Lloyd Wright and the back-to-the-land boys be right and three million Brooldynites be wrong? The community may survive a long time because there are, as Webster said of his old alma mater, those who love it, and because there are also those who cannot get away.

A town, like a British remittance man in Canada, can be supported by distant relatives. Some of our old villages are helped by natives who have gone to big cities and made good. We have towns that, like Colonial Williamsburg, have become museums and monuments which stir memories but have no grip on ambitious boys and girls. There are, to be sure, not many such communities in our new country. Those that exist should keep up standards but should not try to compete with rushing, raucous, new places. It is better to live on charm than to be an imitation Babylon.

Only the city can afford the arts in their broadest and most developed sense, because it takes population to keep art centers alive and flourishing. The same reasoning applies to great medical centers which require the most nearly complete clinical facilities, to management headquarters of banking and big business, and to many mercantile establishments which have to be close together.

The nearby country as well as the suburb is meaningless without the city. Los Angeles supports a veritable paradise of truck farmers and orchards almost at its borders, and New York is the big market for the potatoes, ducks and shellfish of Long Island. Proximity of city and country, warm shorefront and glacial heights, ranch and bungalow, is what makes California such a strong rival of the Atlantic and Gulf seaboard and the Middle West. Our entire economy is dependent on urban, suburban and rural integration.

Obviously, city life is not doomed, although some particular town may be static, advancing or going back. In studying any particular community, there is no quick, smooth categorical answer to the never-ending challenges of growth and change. Intelligent citizens should study the main forces at work, the pulls and pressures. Much depends on the traditions of the town, on its special interests, on types of leadership and the strength of advocates of conservative improvement as against radical and revolutionary uprooting.

Diversity in metropolitan areas

It is a great mistake to assume that the overbuilt and deliberately overcrowded midtown section of every big city is the city, and that nothing else in it counts. Parts of big towns are like suburbs and even country. The significant and often prevailing and controlling outskirts, peripheries and relatively quiet residential places where respectable people keep the noiseless tenor of their way—places which make no pretense of being "stems," Broadway crossroads, "hot spots," "loops" and what not, and with no special bids to visitors—are more characteristic of the city, more redolent of its quality and flavor than the places ballyhooed by barkers and touted by advertisers. The barkers always show off the

city slums, the Harlems, Bowery, Basin streets, Chinatowns, Little Italy, the former ghettos, and so on, and picture them as a fixed, unchangeable, inevitable feature of city life. But it simply is not so.

In our cities the shallows murmur, but the deeps are dumb. There are more churchgoers than cabaret hounds, but they make less noise. The jazz joints, with their raucous snare drums and trumpets, are more obtrusive but much less important than the long-drawn aisles and fretted vaults where, as the poet said, the pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

The spreading suburbs also have their logic, not only as dormitories for commuters and garden spots for their wives and children, but also as places from which, by rail and road, the manifold attractions of the city can easily be reached without the distractions and handicaps of city life.

It is sad to see venal, weak or complacent local officials, indifferent to recent history, permitting the subdividers, real estate developers and their co-conspirators and victims to repeat the same tricks in the suburbs which made the slums of the cities a few generations ago—small lots, narrow streets, with parks, schools, and utilities of all kinds waiting for future assessments on unsuspecting purchasers. Higher standards must come from the average citizen. Water cannot rise above its own level.

The suburbs, too, often are leaderless. I worry more about the suburbs than about the cities. In the cities we are at least aware of and are trying to undo the errors of the past. In the suburbs these felonies are being compounded and perpetuated.

Some suburban problems

I do not believe that the metropolis is obsolete. The city is still the center of gravity of modern civilization. Parts of it of course are antiquated, especially slums and rundown, depressed areas which are the results of the past selfishness of capital, the weakness of government and the indifference of the citizenry. We have at least been educated above this level to some understanding of the difficulties, costs and sacrifices which must be made to remedy conditions which under better leadership would never have occurred.

Our big cities must be rebuilt, not abandoned. While this is being done the suburbs will continue to grow amazingly, and open country previously considered beyond commuting distance will become suburban. But let us not fool ourselves about the spreading city. There are just as many problems involved in rapid, uncontrolled, suburban growth as in the rebuilding of substandard midtown urban sections.

As we reflect on suburban growth we begin to recognize that this is not an unmixed blessing. I am not at all sure that the problems of the suburbs are not more serious and less understood than those of the city. I have never yet seen one of these big plans for suburban "developments" start out with a proper diagnosis of future problems.

The Levittown community on Long Island is an example. Here the builders took a number of farms, open land, and built some 17,000 houses to accommodate 75,000 people. When you live in the heart of the city you have

facilities which, while they may not be just to your liking, do provide schools, streets, sewers, water, electric and gas utilities and some established forms of transportation. When you go out in the open country, however, all these problems gradually rear their ugly heads to plague you. I have seen them develop. You decide that putting in cesspools is safe to start with, but soon you are taking water out of the same ground to drink, no doubt at a different level, and then a water supply problem arises. Nobody pays much attention to drainage, and all of a sudden you have to do something about storm sewers.

Somebody is going to get the bills for that. Some one will be assessed. Bills also have got to be paid for sewage plants. Cesspools and well water for 75,000 people do not mix for any length of time. Transportation and schools must be provided. There is no use going through the roster of necessities. They descend upon the community as a whole after the developer, the fellow who has moved these people or industries to virgin territory has departed and closed his account books.

"Rus in urbe"

Only a pretentious scribbler would glory in the boast that Augustus Caesar found Rome built of brick and left it built of marble. Our watchword should be that we found our city a wilderness of stone and steel, crowded and inaccessible, and that we opened it to light and air, planted it with the green of parks and the laughter of playgrounds, and carved out wide Spokes and rims for parkways and expressways to make the city and country one.

I dismiss as unworthy of serious consideration the gloomy prophets who label cities as obsolete because of the possibility of atomic bombing. If the hydrogen bombs actually fall, we shall all be finished. Meanwhile, apprehension and premature terror can paralyze us before anything really happens. These are just the objectives the Communists aim at in their cold, psychological warfare.

It is the ambition of every official responsible for the rebuilding and improvement of cities to increase the open spaces, reduce the coverage of land, salvage, restore and preserve natural resources; in fact, to approximate the old Roman idea of *rus in urbe*, the country in the city.

The city, rebuilt, modernized and humanized, will always be the great magnet which draws from the hinterland the eager, the young, the curious, the ambitious, the talented. These, from the dawn of history, have gravitated to big places where the incentives are most dramatic, where competition is strongest and rewards great. Ours is an emerging new people of many stocks and talents in a land of extraordinary variety. Country and city, we are knitted together.

Our suburbs will in time somehow attain bouquet, flavor, character and personality. The residents, mostly young couples with small children, will form friendships. Acquaintances will cross the parkways and highways which separate one development from another. Marriages will cement the Montagus and Capulets of these scattered communities. Thus eventually they will produce leaders with vision and pride and by some mysterious alchemy develop a sense of unity.