

OUR COUNTRY VILLAGES

Downing, A. J.*

A.J. Downing¹ ya expone aquí su preocupación por el destrozo del paisaje – natural- a través de la ‘urbanización’, hecho que constata, paralela a la búsqueda de referentes que permitan crear y consoliden nuevos paisajes ‘ciudadanos’.

Aunque el contexto espacial y temporal de que habla esté muy acotado, las preocupaciones, ‘propuestas’ y los términos en que éstas se concretan, son fáciles de extrapolar y podrían implicar en sus reflexiones a distintos apartados de cualquiera de los artículos que la revista recoge. Hay inherentes cuestiones como el grado en que uno u otro gobierno se puede apropiar, interpretar y gestionar un elemento de planificación urbana, Downing fue en los años cuarenta del XIX el primer defensor acérrimo del parque público como la principal institución civil de la democracia norteamericana. Hasta otras más básicas: ¿Qué buscan los que acaban en el medio de una hilera interminable de adosados? ¿Qué horizonte divisan desde la ventana? ¿Qué grado de comunidad les estructura?. Gracias a sus artículos Downing fue un verdadero ‘creador de gusto’ para sus compatriotas, confiando tanto en las enormes oportunidades del inmenso paisaje norteamericano como en la iniciativa ciudadana para crear su identidad, un ‘paisaje intermedio’ en el que su uso de la palabra ‘rural’ implica al concepto del ‘suburbio’ (residencial americano).

Without any boasting, it may safely be said, that the natural features of our common country (as the speakers in Congress call her), are as agreeable and prepossessing as those of any other land—whether merry England, la belle France, or the German fatherland. We have greater lakes, larger rivers, broader and more fertile prairies than the old world can show; and if the Alleghanies are rather dwarfish when compared to the Alps, there are peaks and summits, "castle hills" and volcanoes, in our great back-bone range of the Pacific—the Rocky Mountains— which may safely hold up their heads along with Mont Blanc and the Jungfrau.

* DOWNING, A. J.- “Our country villages”, en *Rural Essays*, New York, Leavitt and Alien, ed. by George William Curtis, 1857.

¹ Downing, experto en horticultura, fue el primer escritor americano sobre temas de paisajismo; escribe el *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening Adapted to North America*, 1841, profundamente influenciado por Loudon, y a su vez tendrá una notable influencia en el despertar del interés por la mejora de propiedades en el campo; y, ante todo, animará a la gente ‘to do something about their environment’ (ref. NEWTON, T.- *Design on the Land*, 1971; y ROGERS, E.B.- *Landscape design: a Cultural land Architectural History*, 2001.)

Providence, then, has blessed this country—our country—with "natural born" features, which we may look upon and be glad. But how have we sought to deform the fair landscape here and there by little, miserable shabby-looking towns and villages; not miserable and shabby-looking from the poverty and wretchedness of the inhabitants—for in no land is there more peace and plenty—but miserable and shabby-looking from the absence of taste, symmetry, order, space, proportion,—all that constitutes beauty. Ah, well and truly did Cowper say,

"God made the country, but man made the town."

For in the one, we every where see utility and beauty harmoniously combined, while the other presents us but too often the reverse; that is to say, the marriage of utility and deformity.

Some of our readers may remind us that we have already preached a sermon from this text. No matter; we should be glad to preach fifty; yes, or even establish a sect,—as that seems the only way of making proselytes now,—whose duty it should be to convert people living in the country towns to the true faith; we mean the true rural faith, viz., that it is immoral and uncivilised to live in mean and uncouth villages, where there is no poverty, or want of intelligence in the inhabitants; that there is nothing laudable in having a piano-forte and mahogany chairs in the parlour, where the streets outside are barren of shade trees, destitute of side-walks, and populous with pigs and geese.

We are bound to admit (with a little shame and humiliation,—being a native of New-York, the "Empire State"), that there is one part of the Union where the millennium of country towns, and good government, and rural taste has not only commenced, but is in full domination. We mean, of course, Massachusetts. The traveller may go from one end of that State to the other, and find flourishing villages, with broad streets lined with maples and elms, behind which are goodly rows of neat and substantial dwellings, full of evidences of order, comfort and taste. Throughout the whole State, no animals are allowed to run at large in the streets of towns and villages. Hence so much more cleanliness than elsewhere; so much more order and neatness; so many more pretty rural lanes; so many inviting flower-gardens and orchards—only separated from the passerby by a low railing or hedge, instead of a formidable board fence. Now, if you cross the State line into New-York—a State of far greater wealth than Massachusetts, as long settled and nearly as populous—you feel directly that you are in the land of "pigs and poultry," in the least agreeable sense of the word. In passing through villages and towns, the truth is still more striking, as you go to the south and west; and you feel little or nothing of that sense, of "how pleasant it must be to live here," which the traveller through Berkshire, or the Connecticut valley, or the pretty villages about Boston, feels moving his heart within him. You are rather inclined to wish there were two new commandments, viz.: thou shalt plant trees, to hide the nakedness of the streets; and thou shalt not keep pigs — except in the back yard! ²

² We believe we must lay this latter sin at the doors of our hard-working emigrants from the Emerald Isle. Wherever they settle, they cling to their ancient fraternity of porkers; and think it "no free

Our more reflective and inquiring readers will naturally ask, why is this better condition of things—a condition that denotes better citizens, better laws, and higher civilization—confined almost wholly to Massachusetts? To save them an infinite deal of painstaking research and investigation, we will tell them in a few words. That State is better educated than the rest. She sees the advantage, morally and socially, of orderly, neat, tasteful villages; in producing better citizens, in causing the laws to be respected, in making homes dearer and more sacred, in making domestic life and the enjoyment of property to be more truly and rightly estimated.

And these are the legitimate and natural results of this kind of improvement we so ardently desire in the outward life and appearance of rural towns. If our readers suppose us anxious for the building of good houses, and the planting of street avenues, solely that the country may look more beautiful to the eye, and that the taste shall be gratified, they do us an injustice. This is only the external sign by which we would have the country's health and beauty known, as we look for the health and beauty of its fair daughters in the presence of the rose on their cheeks. But as the latter only blooms lastingly there, when a good constitution is joined with healthful habits of mind and body, so the tasteful appearance which we long for in our country towns, we seek as the outward mark of education, moral sentiment, love of home, and refined cultivation, which makes the main difference between Massachusetts and Madagascar.

We have, in a former number, said something as to the practical manner in which "graceless villages" may be improved. We have urged the force of example in those who set about improving their own property, and shown the influence of even two or three persons in giving an air of civilization and refinement to the streets and suburbs of country towns. There is not a village in America, however badly planned at first, or ill-built afterwards, that may not be redeemed, in a great measure, by the aid of shade trees in the streets, and a little shrubbery in the front yards, and it is never too late or too early to project improvements of this kind. Every spring and every autumn should witness a revival of associated efforts on the part of select-men, trustees of corporations, and persons of means and influence, to adorn and embellish the external condition of their towns. Those least alive to the result as regards beauty, may be roused as to the effects of increased value given to the property thus improved, and villages thus rendered attractive and desirable as places of residence.

But let us now go a step further than this. In no country, perhaps, are there so many new villages and towns laid out every year as in the United States. Indeed,, so large is the number, that the builders and projectors are fairly at a loss for names,—ancient and modern history having been literally worn threadbare by the godfathers, until all association with great heroes and mighty deeds is fairly beggared by this re-christening going on in our new settlements and future towns,

country where pigs can't have their liberty." Newburgh is by no means a well-planned village, though scarcely surpassed for scenery; but we believe it may claim the credit of being the only one among all the towns, cities and villages of New-York where pigs and geese have not the freedom of the streets.

as yet only populous to the extent of six houses. And notwithstanding the apparent vastness of our territory, the growth of new towns and new States is so wonderful-fifteen or twenty years giving a population of hundreds of thousands, where all was wilderness before-that the plan and arrangement of new towns ought to be a matter of national importance. And yet, to judge by the manner in which we see the thing done, there has not, in the whole duration of the republic, been a single word said, or a single plan formed, calculated to embody past experience, or to assist in any way the laying out of a village or town.

We have been the more struck by this fact in observing the efforts of some companies who have lately, upon the Hudson within some twenty or more miles of New-York, undertaken to lay out rural villages, with some pretension to taste and comfort; and aim, at least, at combining the advantages of the country with easy railroad access to them.

Our readers most interested in such matters as this (and, taking our principal cities together, it is a pretty large class), will be interested to know what is the beau-ideal of these companies who undertake to buy tracts of land, lay them out in the best manner, and form the most complete and attractive rural villages, in order to tempt those tired of the way worn life of sidewalks, into a neighborhood where without losing society, they can see the horizon, breathe the fresh air, and walk upon elastic greensward.

Well, the beau-ideal of these newly-planned villages is not down to the zero of dirty lanes and shadeless roadsides, but it rises, we are sorry to say, no higher than streets, lined on each side with shade-trees, and bordered with rows of houses. For the most part, those houses-cottages, we presume-are to be built on fifty-foot lots; or if any buyer is not satisfied with that amount of elbow room, he may buy two lots, though certain that his neighbour will still be within twenty feet of his fence. And this is the sum total of the rural beauty, convenience, and comfort, of the latest plan for a rural village in the Union.³

The buyer gets nothing more than he has in town, save his little patch of back and front yard, a little peep down the street, looking one way at the river, and the other way at the sky. So far from gaining any thing which all inhabitants of a village should gain by the combination, one of these new villagers actually loses; for if he were to go by himself, he would buy land cheaper, and have a fresh landscape of fields and hills around him, instead of houses on all sides, almost as closely placed as in the city, which he has endeavored to fly from.

Now a rural village-newly planned in the suburbs of a great city, and planned, too, specially for those whose circumstances will allow them to own a tasteful cottage in such a village-should present attractions much higher than this. It should aim at something higher than mere rows of houses upon streets crossing each other at right angles, and bordered with shade-trees. Any one may find as good shade-trees, and much better houses in certain streets of the city which he leaves behind him; and if he is to give up fifty conveniences and comforts, long

³ We say plan, but we do not mean to include in this such villages as Northampton, Brookline, &c., beautiful and tasteful as they are. But they are in Massachusetts!

enjoyed in town, for the mere fact of fresh air, he had better take board during the summer months in some snug farmhouse as before.

The indispensable desiderata in rural villages of this kind are the following: 1st, a large open space, common, or park, situated in the middle of the village—not less than twenty acres; and better, if fifty or more in extent. This should be well planted with groups of trees, and kept as a lawn. The expense of mowing it would be paid by the grass in some cases; and in others, a considerable part of the space might be inclosed with a wire fence, and fed by sheep or cows, like many of the public parks in England.

This park would be the nucleus or heart of the village, and would give it an essentially rural character. Around it should be grouped all the best cottages and residences of the place; and this would be secured by selling no lots fronting upon it of less than one-fourth of an acre in extent. Wide streets, with rows of elms or maples, should diverge from the park on each side, and upon these streets smaller lots, but not smaller than one hundred feet front, should be sold for smaller cottages.

In this way, we would secure to our village a permanent rural character, first, by the possession of a large central space, always devoted to park or pleasure-ground, and always held as joint property and for the common use of the whole village; second, by the imperative arrangement of cottages or dwellings around it, in such a way as to secure in all parts of the village sufficient space, view, circulation of air, and broad, well-planted avenues of shade-trees.

After such a village was built, and the central park planted a few years, the inhabitants would not be contented with the mere meadow and trees, usually called a park in this country. By submitting to a small annual tax per family, they could turn the whole park, its small, or considerable portions, here and there if large into pleasure-grounds. In the latter, there would be collected, by the combined means of the village, all the rare, hardy shrubs, trees, and plants, usually found in the private grounds of any amateur in America. Beds and masses of ever-blooming roses, sweet-scented climbers, and the richest shrubs, would thus be open to the enjoyment of all during the whole growing season. Those who had neither the means, time, nor inclination, to devote to the culture of private pleasure-grounds, could thus enjoy those which belonged to all. Others might prefer to devote their own garden to fruits and vegetables, since the pleasure-grounds, which belonged to all, and which all would enjoy, would, by their greater breadth and magnitude, offer beauties and enjoyments which few private gardens can give.

The next step, after the possession of such public pleasure-grounds, would be the social and common enjoyment of them. Upon the well-mown glades of lawn, and beneath the shade of the forest-trees, would be formed rustic seats. Little arbours would be placed near, where in midsummer evenings ices would be served to all who wished them. And, little by little, the musical taste of the village (with the help of those good musical folks—the German emigrants) would organise itself into a band, which would occasionally delight the ears of all frequenters of the park with popular airs.

Do we overrate the mental and moral influences of such a common ground of entertainment as this, when we say that the inhabitants of such a village—enjoying in this way a common interest in flowers, trees, the fresh air, and sweet music, daily—would have something more healthful than the ordinary life of cities, and more refining and elevating than the common gossip of country villages!

"Ah! I see, Mr. Editor, you are a bit of a communist." By no means. On the contrary, we believe, above all things under

heaven, in the power and virtue of the individual home. We devote our life and humble efforts to raising its condition. But people must live in towns and villages, and therefore let us raise the condition of towns and villages, and especially of rural towns and villages, by all possible means!

But we are republican; and, shall we confess it, we are a little vexed that as a people generally, we do not see how much in America we lose by not using the advantages of republicanism. We mean now, for refined culture, physical comfort, and the like. Republican education we are now beginning pretty well to understand the value of; and it will not be long before it will be hard to find a native citizen who cannot read and write. And this comes by making every man see what a great moral and intellectual good comes from cheerfully bearing a part in the burden of popular education. Let us next take up popular refinement in the arts, manners, social life, and innocent enjoyments, and we shall see what a virtuous and educated republic can really become.

Besides this, it is the proper duty of the state—that is, the people—to do in this way what the reigning power does in a monarchy. If the kings and princes in Germany, and the sovereign of England, have made magnificent parks and pleasure-gardens, and thrown them wide open for the enjoyment of all classes of the people (the latter, after all, having to pay for it), may it not be that our sovereign *people* will (far more cheaply, as they may) make and support these great and healthy sources of pleasure and refinement for themselves in America? We believe so; and we confidently wait for the time when public parks, public gardens, public galleries, and tasteful villages, shall be among the peculiar features of our happy republic.