

# The Meaning and Practical Application of Town Planning

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That there has been a good deal of confusion in the public mind regarding what is meant by "town planning" is partly due to the fact that the term itself does not adequately express the meaning intended to be conveyed by those who originated the town planning movement. A brief description of the history of the term may help to elucidate its meaning.

The town planning movement was very different in its origin to what is known in the United States as "city planning," and some reference to that difference will help the object of this article. For that purpose we have to ignore the actual meanings of the words "city" and "town," and treat the two terms "town planning" and "city planning" as conventional phrases that respectively describe two somewhat different movements—the first originating in Britain and the second in the United States. "City planning" in its more modern application probably has its genesis in the grouping and spacious lay-out of the buildings erected for the Chicago Exhibition in 1893. Springing from such a source it has developed into a movement for remodelling existing cities, especially in regard to the grouping and situation of their public buildings and parks. It has therefore been more concerned with the replanning of towns as they now are, rather than with the planning of new parts of towns or of new towns. The work of most City Planning Commissions in the United States, and the American impress which has been given to the work of some City Planning Commissions in Canada, such as that of the city of Ottawa, has been along these lines. As a means of providing an imaginative picture of what might have been, or of what could be if financial conditions permitted, it has fascinating features. But as a means of helping to solve the pressing economic and public health problems of our cities it has so far proved itself of comparatively little value. To accomplish that task we have to approach the planning of the city from the point of view of the administrator and the medical officer as well as from that of the artist and engineer.

## Broader Meaning of Town Planning.

The term "town planning," which originated in Britain, takes up the subject in this broader sense. Its chief attraction to Canadian cities at the moment arises from the fact that they are face to face with the need for conserving their financial resources, for improving the home life of the people, and for stimulating industry, as essential features of any scheme of planning for the future. This does not mean that the aesthetic features of town planning are to be ignored. These aesthetic features are of two kinds, the one concerned with the preservation of natural and spacious surroundings to all buildings in the city, and the other with the creation and grouping of beautiful public buildings. The former can be attained without much cost by proper planning, and the exercise of foresight in the lay-out of the land; it is part of the problem of combining healthy living conditions with a sound economic system of land development; it is a necessary part of a plan based on utility. The aesthetic features which have to be created at large public expense are, however, necessarily of the nature of luxuries, however important or desirable they may be in the building up of the ideal city. It is these latter features which take first place in many city planning schemes, with the result that such schemes fail to be of much practical value. City planning is a failure so far as it is solely concerned with the erection of beautiful buildings and the remodelling of existing streets and transportation systems, on the lines of the Chicago city plan, if these things are beyond the financial resources of the community which has to carry out the plan. On the other hand, what is known as the British system of town planning is concerned with laying healthy foundations for future growth by the exercise of wise foresight in regard to all problems of the city, including, of course, architectural and engineering problems, and in doing so to aim at conserving the resources of each community rather than in increasing its indebtedness by expensive schemes.

Some writers appear to assume that the modern British system of town planning had its origin in the Prussian Building-lines Act, which, by the way, is not a town or city

planning act in any real sense. The title of the German Act is *Fluchtliniengesetz*, meaning Building-lines Act, and the only other term it contains with any reference to "plan" is "*Bebauungsplan*" or simply "plan." "*Stadtplan*" i.e., town-plan, does not occur.

## Origin of British Town Planning Act.

The terms "town-plan" and "town planning" probably were first used in a descriptive sense to the movement in 1906 by Councillor Nettlefold in a speech delivered by him in Birmingham, and in the November following the phrase was employed by a deputation which approached Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the then Premier of Great Britain, to urge the desirability of passing a Town Planning Act. The Town Planning Act, which was prepared by Mr. John Burns, and passed through the British house in 1909, was the ultimate outcome of that representation. We have to retrace our steps, however, to understand the origins of the movement. To a certain extent they arose from a study of German practice in controlling city development, a study started by Mr. Horsfall in his book on "The example of Germany." As a result of that study there arose a movement as strongly opposed to some of the results of German practice as it was favourable to other results. Behind the imposing fronts and palatial public buildings of German cities, which were secured by autocratic control of building operations, there was known to be appalling housing conditions—as bad as anything in Europe outside of some of the Slav cities of the south—and one of the points urged in connection with the need for town planning legislation was that it should deal with sanitation and amenity in connection with housing conditions as one of its most important features. Moreover, there has been in operation for some years in England a series of private schemes which had shown how much proper housing conditions could be promoted by town planning. The garden villages of Bournville and Port Sunlight, the garden city of Letchworth, the garden suburb of Hampstead and the schemes of Lord Lytton, Sir Richard Paget and other private landowners, all showed the way to a better system of developing land than had been possible under the by-laws which had controlled building operations in England since the Public Health Act was passed in 1875. It was really as a consequence of these schemes, stimulated to some extent by systems of building control in Italy, Sweden and Germany, that the Act of 1909 was framed.

## Town Planning Seeks to Prevent Rather Than Cure.

Thus it was that this Act had for its general object the securing of "proper sanitary conditions, convenience and amenity in connection with the laying out of land." That object, applied in a liberal and comprehensive way, means that it embraces all questions connected with new urban growth, whether it be in the suburbs of existing cities, towns and villages, or in the form of new cities, towns and villages. Only in an indirect way does it touch the question of remodelling existing conditions. It seeks to prevent rather than to cure—its primary object being to create satisfactory conditions for the future.

But although this emphasis has to be placed on the principal object of town planning, its value is not confined to areas undergoing the process of development for the first time. Proper planning helps to secure greater equality of land values by reducing heights of buildings and improving systems of transportation; it decentralises the demand for land and lessens the need for crowding the unhealthy central areas. It makes the suburbs more attractive to live in, improves the environment and raises the sanitary standard of the small houses. As the sanitary standard is raised unhealthy houses can more easily be condemned. It therefore helps to solve the problem of existing bad conditions by a flank attack which is more economical and valuable than a direct attack—and which makes direct measures easier to accomplish when they have to be resorted to.

Owing to the fact that the remodelling of existing conditions is almost prohibitive in cost in most cities this form of indirect attack upon the evils of unsanitary housing, congestion, and bad traffic conditions must be resorted to if we are to succeed.