

# The Charm of Natural Planning

IN the various schemes which are put forward in these days for city planning and development the main fault seems to me to lie in the attitude of the designer, which is usually that of a cold and calculating schemer, writes M. H. Baillie Scott in "The Architectural Review" of London. This brutal and callous scientific spirit can never give to us the city of our dreams. We must set out to realize as far as we can the New Jerusalem—a heaven on earth—and test all our conceptions by the touch-stone of that ideal. We ought to approach the matter from the right end and start with the unit of our design, which is the house itself. And since it is desirable that houses should be of rectangular form, it follows that groups of houses should be rectangular, too, and that radiating and diagonal lines of roads which chop the buildings adjoining them into awkward shapes should be avoided. The best plan for a city is surely the old one—in which within a walled enclosure four main roads meet in a central market square. The four wards of the city are subdivided into smaller squares by smaller streets, and this scheme logically implies the arrangement of houses into courts approached by archways from the streets. This court arrangement, of which we find so many beautiful examples in old towns, is surely the finest way we can conceive of combining buildings, and more especially so when the scale is not too large. For an example near at hand, could anything be better than the little court of Staple Inn with its old paving and central tree? Such exquisite surprises as that are worth all the dreary endless avenues our town-planners rejoice to inflict upon us.

Apart from scientific expediency, the modern town planner seems chiefly to aim at "splitting the ears of the grundleings" by something colossal and immense in scale. He has yet to learn that art is not a question of *avoir du pois* and that the best kind of beauty is to be found in quite simple and humble things. The vulgar desire to "lick creation" with some immense building seems to pervade all our modern conceptions. It is the Prussianism of art. Adjoining buildings of reasonable scale are dwarfed by colossal monsters built at huge expense. Examples in this kind are to be found in most of the central parts of London, and all the sane and simple work of the eighteenth century has to give way to hideous vulgarisms in stone. Nothing is more pitiable as a spectacle than the puffing and blowing and strutting like the frog in the fable on the part of our designers. It is a disease of the mind, and in any modest and sane community would be treated as such.

But, bad as such buildings are in their sense-

less waste of human labor, they are not perhaps so disastrous as the modern suburb, and more especially when it takes the form of what is called, for some unknown reason, "the garden suburb." Here we have vague and sloppy arrangements of dwellings which go to the other extreme of scale. They are gabled and fussy and petty. They pose and smirk at us in their self-conscious artistry. It is the fashion now to say rude things about the slums, but there are not a few back streets in London which merely want cleaning up to make them excellent dwelling-places for those who do not want to be waylaid by self-advertised art every corner. For my own part, I would choose one of these in preference to any garden suburb I have seen. They are restful and peaceable and honest, and they make no pretensions of any kind.

And now we have invented a new horror in building. It is the colony of "dwellings for the working classes." The phrase itself carries with it the condemnation of our social system, implying as it does a broad division of the community into those who work and live in duplicated little dwellings imposed on them by the State, and those who don't work and who live where they like or can.

Would it not be possible to return to the old and better way of building, when towns were definitely outlined conceptions set in natural country surroundings? If in such a case further building is required, would it not be better to start from a series of subsidiary centers instead of creating vague and nebulous suburban areas which are neither fish, flesh nor good red herring? And why should we isolate and segregate our workers like lepers from the community? In the old village the squire and parson contrived to exist in close association with their humble neighbors.

It is a question how far the making of a town should consist of the realization of a predetermined plan, or how far it should be allowed to develop naturally. It would seem the best way to lay down at least the main lines, and yet leave some possibility of variation in the lesser streets.

If a plan fully takes into consideration the levels of the ground and local features such as trees, it will necessarily become somewhat varied in its general aspect. Planning of the best kind has all the air of natural development, because the designer has yielded to local conditions and allowed them to mold and modify his initial conception.

Where there is no vision the people perish. The materialism of science as applied to building will never satisfy our souls. Our towns and