



U R B A N

BEFORE European settlement began New Zealand from the air would have appeared almost empty. The Maori pas and villages, many of them perched on hilltops and coastal crags, would hardly have been noticed, and there was little trace of human occupation on the flat. By the 1840's, when European settlement had begun, the picture had changed, and over the next 80 years in the full tide of Victorian styles of building the foundations were laid for the pattern of our towns and for our way of living. This turned out to be a preference for the single detached house set in its own plot of land to make up streets and towns. In the cities the single houses were interspersed with colonial replicas of Victorian England's cheap housing schemes. It is to the Victorians we must bow when we wonder who first created our suburbs.

And so it went on. Land was plentiful and New Zealand children grew used to having plenty of space to play in, with large playing fields at school and, for most of them, plenty of room in their own backyards. In this century as Victorian houses gave way to Californian-style bungalows, and our own architects began to have an influence on the scene the single detached house was still the ideal. Blocks of flats were unpopular and mostly confined to the cities. Then, just before the Second World War, this pattern began to alter. Large housing schemes were started, and the State house—for its time remarkably enlightened—became as familiar to New Zealanders as the street pillar box.

After the war many large urban development schemes were started. At the time the main problem was that of building sufficient dwellings to make up for the loss

in the war years and so house our growing population as quickly as possible. The Lower Hutt Valley disappeared in a sea of houses, and in almost every town new and larger tracts of State houses began to spring up.

But at the same time as the State houses were spreading, private houses were going up everywhere at a startling rate. If we were to take our pre-Victorian traveller on an aerial tour today he would see, all along our coasts, ragged little seaside settlements. Our smaller towns would be seen spreading out into the surrounding farm lands, and if he could stay hovering in one place for long enough and take the equivalent of the film camera-man's time-lapse shots he could watch farms being sold, and houses, dairies, milk-bars and shops creeping up in their place. In the cities the changes would occur more rapidly and on a larger scale—Auckland with its long arterial roads running out to its industrial suburbs, making miles of unchecked housing; Wellington, having overrun the neighbouring flat land, climbing up the hills and out to the new development areas in the north at Porirua. This unchecked development is what we mean by urban sprawl.

Today urban sprawl is under fire. Geographers, architects and town plan-



"A preference for the single detached house set in its own plot of land"

In recent weeks a number of responsible New Zealanders have been warning us once more that the development of our towns and cities is getting out of hand; that "urban sprawl," as they call it, has become a threat to progress and sensible living. This is the first of two articles examining this problem; the second will appear next week.

ners are among those who have harsh words to say about it. "Urban sprawl has to be stopped," said a town planner—"Pocket and ribbon development is taking place in several areas around Wellington at present," said the Mayor of Wellington, Mr Kitts.

Why are the experts attacking urban sprawl? You may live in one of our remoter suburbs and live well. The only disadvantages may seem to be the crowded daily train that carries you to work, spilling you out of the station on to a still more crowded tram. You may know more about the area in which you work than you do about your home—although this may not always seem a disadvantage.

Urban sprawl is attacked because it is eating up our agricultural land, and we have not enough of this to waste. It is attacked by architects, who deplore its ugliness, its wastefulness and the transport and servicing problems it causes. It is attacked by town planners who see in its haphazard penetration of the country a way of living that runs counter to all the principles of good town planning. Impressive figures are drawn up to buttress their charges. One of the most significant is the great rate of our population growth. Most of the people coming into New Zealand are not agricultural workers, and will be living in towns, many of them working in factories and at other manufactures.

If these problems are not met we shall continue a process of drift that has landed us where we are today. On the other hand, if our future development can be controlled there are untold possibilities for a more imaginative New Zealand than the one we now live in.

The attack on urban sprawl was recently given prominence by a group of

Wellington architects and town planners "The Architectural Centre," who staged a small exhibition called "Homes Without Sprawl," and pointing out the facts we have already outlined. Increasing population, decreasing farm land—dismal enough when you see them in print, are the facts which the architects tried to meet in a practical way.

Taking a site at Plimmerton in rolling hill country, they demonstrated six possible ways of building terrace houses upon it which would keep the most important features of the detached house—privacy, a garden—but at the same time would result in a much more pleasing landscape and save a great deal of land into the bargain.

To present as wide a picture of this process of urban sprawl as possible, *The Listener* recently called on several people whose work brings them into close contact with the problem.

First we talked to an architect, Mr. A. A. Wild, President of the Architectural Centre, which arranged the exhibition.

"The Architectural Centre' is a group, half of whom are architects, the remainder of whom are people generally interested in the visual arts and sciences," he said. "We are concerned, as people who have thought about these problems of urban sprawl, with collectively and dispassionately presenting the facts. Originally the Centre set itself up precisely because it was concerned with all aspects of working for the general improvement of town and countryside.

"The architect doesn't just look at these things from his own pigeonhole—he is concerned with a great many things besides producing good houses. As a citizen and ratepayer he is concerned with the national effect his

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