

SPRAWL

buildings are having, with the effect they have on the people who live in them, and the way of life they perpetuate. I do want to stress the fact that he's not just concerned as an abstract artist. He's concerned as a qualified practitioner and is very conscious of the limitations imposed on him by society. He very often feels that he is perpetuating a system which he knows is wrong, but there is very little he as an individual architect can do about it, as such a system is very often perpetuated by legislation and even by Government-controlled bodies.

"Housing is one of our liveliest political issues, and one of our biggest industries, yet it is geared through the structure of trade and through its control by legislation, Government policy, and national habit to a pattern which is forced upon everybody—a pattern from which there is not any escape. There is an enormous resistance to anything that would move in the direction of a more flexible pattern than urban sprawl. Urban sprawl is our national myth."

Our next opinion came from a geographer, S. H. Franklin, lecturer in geography at Victoria University College.

"Six years ago people were talking about the problems of urban sprawl, and I feel that six years hence they will still be talking," he said. "Preventing urban sprawl means intruding upon the vested interests of private property—your property and my property, and the conflict between our social responsibility and individual rights is not always easily solved. The economic and social costs of urban sprawl, however, are becoming more apparent. Those people living in distant suburbs are aware of the high costs of travelling to work, of their social inaccessibility and isolation, of their high property rates with little in return. The cheap sections which attracted them out there proved to be not so cheap.

"Consideration must be given to the social aspects of urban sprawl, for to

prevent it you must persuade people that living in areas of high building density is preferable to their own quarter-acre, but isolated and costly sections. "An intensive national survey into all the physical, social and economic aspects of urban sprawl is a very necessary first step and the publication of its results the second. It is then up to the planners and architects to persuade us that they have something better to offer in the way of urban living. The marked increase of population which will take place during the next 25 years makes it certain that we must become used to being closer together."

To the town planners urban sprawl is unnecessary sprawl. A town planner said: "By its decisions the Town and Country Planning Appeal Board has taken the view that urban sprawl is contrary to the principle of the Town and Country Planning Act. The city and town councils have powers to prevent it, and by and large they are using those powers. Awareness of the seriousness of the problem is growing—people in responsible positions are well aware of it—but this feeling is not yet general enough."

Finally we talked to John Watson, an educationist, who is interested in the sociological aspects, and here we met a surprise.

"I still don't think urban sprawl is a bad thing," he said. "There are other values possible than the architect's ones and urban life allows certain of these values to come to fruition. For some groups urban sprawl is the ideal. On the other hand, of course, a lot of New Zealanders don't like it. Most single people and many city dwellers have no desire to live in a garden with a lot of space. I don't feel nearly as upset as the geographers and town planners. We have cars and highways and these aids can make urban sprawl quite feasible."

In America, where Mr Watson spent some time studying, he told us that there is little concern with urban sprawl as such.

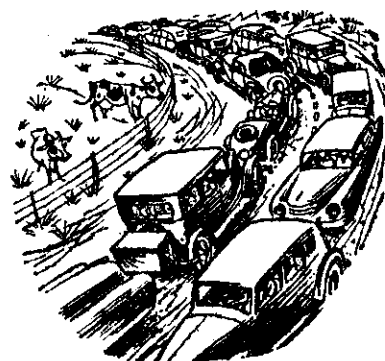
"They're not worried about eating up good farm land—mind you, they have

a good deal to come and go on—but they are interested in urban life as it affects human living. They are a bit concerned about the time spent in travelling to work. In New York 15 million man-hours a week are spent in travelling time. London is worried about the same kind of thing—on the inroads made into health, economy, and so on. The geographers have raised the problem a little in America, people like Mumford and the town planners.

"I feel that our architects haven't done enough research yet on the problems of towns and communities. However, I'm not an old diehard, as I'm all for better suburban living."

Finally, here is what the Minister of Housing, Mr Eyre, had to say about the Wellington exhibition:

"I congratulate the Architectural Centre on the time and thought its members have put into this exhibition, which demonstrates so clearly how our present methods of housing expansion are eating up the land surrounding our large cities. New Zealand depends for its livelihood on primary production and further inroads into the arable land must be viewed with apprehension.



"We have cars and highways and these aids can make urban sprawl quite feasible"

Nevertheless, people must be housed, and the average New Zealander likes his own plot of land. Flats have not as yet proved as popular here as in other countries overseas, but there are definite signs that a proportion of our people are becoming resigned to flat life. . . . The Architectural Centre have met the problem half way. Their scheme envisages closer density, but at the same time retains privacy, giving each house unit a small plot of land. I feel that the work of the centre is on the right lines, and that we as a nation will have to adjust ourselves in the years to come to more crowded but perhaps more comfortable living."

This, then, is the extent of the problem. Our towns and cities are moving inexorably outward, but must we, like ancient Rome, give up planning in despair and wait for a new Nero to burn them down?

"There is a fundamental, demonic, never-ending combat between the two trends, to plan or not to plan, to be provident or to let things happen," writes the American architect Richard Neutra. "Both tendencies are lodged in us and have turns with the ebbing and rising of our vitality. When we are lucky and strong we like to take things into our own hands and plan ahead into the most distant future. When stricken by loss, sickness and failure, our plans shorten desperately and are reduced to the next week or the next day. . . . During a heart attack we only plan for a second or two, for reaching the chair in front of us."

So far in this country we have been mainly on the side of the non-planners, but changes are in the air. "The solving of this problem is the key to making New Zealand interesting," said the Town Planner. Next week we propose to examine more closely the ideas behind planned living and planned town development, and the reactions of the citizen-consumer to them.