

URBAN SPRAWL

LAST week we looked at the problem of Urban Sprawl and saw how unchecked housing development can threaten our cities, towns and land. This week besides illustrating two of the ideas for planned development, taken from the exhibition arranged by the Architectural Centre of Wellington, we asked a Town Planner a little about planning, and collected a number of questions arising from the first article and the exhibition and put them to the appropriate experts.

Although Town Planning is a relatively new idea in New Zealand, in other parts of the world planners have existed since the earliest days—the very first town planner known by his own name lived in ancient Greece. Many of the mediaeval towns so much admired today are the result of good planning,

and in England Edward I was one of the great Royal town planners, once summoning fifty town planners “who knew best how to devise, order and array a new town to the utmost profit of the King and of merchants” to a conference. Queen Elizabeth tried to stop London spreading beyond the walls by a Royal Proclamation—and not surprisingly failed to do so. From those days onwards many of the visions of planners have been left behind to give continual pleasure—buildings by Sir Christopher Wren, by the Woods, father and son, who left the Circus and Crescent in Bath; Haussman's re-designing of Paris, Nash's Regent Street; and today, Corbusier, Gropius and Abercrombie amongst others, continue the tradition. Despite this honourable lineage town planners are often suspect and the bad effects of their work are often pointed out—the unhappy state of Canberra, for instance, which has never fully lived up to its plan, the relentless effect the gridplanners had in New York, and the problems of the new satellite towns of London.

When *The Listener* called to see the Town Planner it was decided to ask him if he could enlarge on a remark he made when discussing Urban Sprawl last week. “The solution of this problem,” he had said, meaning Urban

Sprawl with all its complications, “is the key to making New Zealand interesting.”

What exactly did he mean by interesting? Did it mean more Espresso coffee bars, more skating rinks, more recreational facilities of all kinds: or perhaps a more interesting architecture—with great blocks of flats interspersed with parks and gardens in the manner of Corbusier?

His answer was quite different. “I can explain it this way,” he told us. “Many people say to a planner, ‘What a pity you can't start all over again with a clean slate—that you have to contend with all the limitations imposed on you by existing buildings, and all the difficulties of awkward sites. How much easier it would be if you could start afresh!’ When people say this to me I have to disagree. For the truth is that the planner, like many artists, rejoices in these limitations that are imposed on him. He doesn't want a completely free hand, to be able to do exactly as he likes, to have as much space as he wants.

“What really bring out the best in him, and in most human beings, are the difficulties, and in the realm of town planning the difficulties solved by the planner are the very things that make a town interesting and give it character.

“You'll find that the character of a town depends directly on the number of difficulties the planner had to face. After he has found solutions to them the place can then become interesting and exciting. Unfortunately, we're such a lethargic, easy-going type of nation that we've ceased to regard difficulties as interesting—the truth, however, is quite the contrary.

“If we look at all the planning that must be done in New Zealand, and if we try to plan on the basis of reality—of what is really there—then something much more interesting is going to come out of it. If we have all the facts about a town or city—how its citizens really live and use it—and we build our plans on these facts then, to say the least, our cities will be more truthful. What we're doing now is completely untruthful, it is based on a myth, on a number of myths, in fact.

“Take the simple example of a shopping centre. If we continue to use our shopping centres, at as present, for transport, and we use the properties alongside for shops and offices, then we are bound to have an unsatisfactory shopping centre. If we accept the public transport vehicle, and accept the fact that roaring traffic through inadequate traffic streets is wrong, then we'll get down to tints and evolve something better. It has already happened overseas, and in some parts of the world there are special pedestrian streets. This becomes so much more interesting that when it's done properly it puts the others to shame.

“You can go on multiplying instances like this, but in my view, and I think or all planners, in the final analysis, the form of a city must be directly related to the problems it presents. If you meet those problems then you're on the way to getting an interesting city.”

He looked out the window at the tangle of traffic outside, weaving its way through streets that hadn't changed since the days of horse traffic. “The individual looking at Wellington,” he went on, “knows it should be a city, but it doesn't look like a city because we've failed to meet the problems it raises truthfully.”

“Well, could you give us an example of a present day myth?” we asked.

“Easily,” he replied. “And here is one you'll hear in many a bar near closing time, thumped hard on the counter. It has to do with urban sprawl. Countless people believe that if we combat urban sprawl we'll be disturbing family life—that the houses in our suburbs are full of complete family units of a mother, father, and children. When we come to look at it, however, we find that, in fact, 30 to 40 per cent of households consist only of one or two people. Our housing development is based on the assumption that all, or practically all of our households consist of a full quota of members—and this just isn't true. If we cater for the needs of these people living in ones and twos in whole houses by providing flats and units we won't be upsetting the family man at all.

“Throughout all our planning the thing we most need—and the thing we most need as a people—is ingenuity. An ingenuity which can replace our

ONE SOLUTION? This drawing (from the Architectural Centre's Exhibition “Homes Without Sprawl,” soon to tour other centres) shows staggered terrace houses, two-story maisonette dwelling units, with garage access on the street, and a small rear garden court opening out on to parklands. Every second unit is recessed.

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 5, 1957.

QUESTIONS

