

A Hard Knock at Town Planners

BY P. R. HUDSON

EBENEZER HOWARD, Lewis Mumford, Patrick Geddes, Henry Wright, Le Corbusier and Daniel Burnham — all great names in the history of town planning — are brightly tossed aside by Jane Jacobs, wife of an American architect, as being painful reminders of negative influences which pervade contemporary thought on urban design.

The sum total of these influences, she claims, may be seen in the mammoth mid-Manhattan Lincoln Square redevelopment scheme in New York City. This she describes as a sort of "Radiant Garden City Beautiful." The combination of Howard's views on grass and fountains, Le Corbusier's visions of high buildings, and Burnham's concepts of the monumental has found expression in this project. Grouped together and finished in shining white concrete are an enormous cultural centre, massive thirty-five storey blocks of middle-income-group apartments, schools, parking space, shops and grass. "From beginning to end," writes Mrs. Jacobs, "from Howard to Burnham to the latest amendment on urban-renewal law, the entire concoction is irrelevant to the working of cities. Unstudied, unrespected, cities have served as sacrificial victims to the planners."

Jane Jacobs' audacious book has been the cause of

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much gnashing of teeth on both sides of the Atlantic. Its publication here in a paperback edition is both timely and welcome, for it contains much common sense. The author's challenge to the town planners is a strong one. She pleads with them to abandon their deductive thought processes and invoke inductive ones. She argues for cities to be examined as a "national science" rather than a "physical science" with full weight being given to the marginal decisions that have considerable impact on their organic evolution.

How is it that a housewife has written such a strong indictment of the American planning process? The answer is a simple one. Mrs. Jacobs is a city dweller and a keen observer. Living in Greenwich Village, in New York City, she has noticed those things which to her are symbols of a successful neighbourhood.

First, she emphasises the need for adequate, safe, lively pavement (sidewalk) space combined with useful open space to provide the communicative pedestrian links that the city needs for contact between individuals. Secondly, she considers the desirability of mixed uses in small areas in order to provide variety, diversity, interest and choice. Thirdly, she underlines the advantages of architectural variety, the need for short street blocks and for high concentration of building bulk for some activities. Finally, she reviews the town planning machinery, the financial implications of her suggestions and the failure of the

American Administration to make the most of their opportunities.

While the freshness of Mrs. Jacobs' approach to cities is most pleasing, she finds a little difficulty with her economics. Clearly recognising that the urban housing problem is essentially a poverty problem, she asks why is it necessary to assume that only the public agencies can provide adequately for the poor and the young? From this she advances to the proposition that housing subsidies should take the form of personal rent grants, based on income, to make up any difference between market rents and ability to pay. She suggests, however, that loans should be made available to developers for new construction and rehabilitation; that rent levels should be pegged to developers' costs and profit needs; and that dwellings provided under the scheme should be available in the first instance to selected people to be relocated from other property due for replacement. The direct rent subsidies, she further suggests, should take into account the necessary local property taxes.

It is here that she misses the core of the problem. In failing to examine the nature and effects of alternative types of property tax, Mrs. Jacobs has obviously believed that improvement taxes are essential to local finance systems. Had she taken the trouble to delve as deeply into the consequences of taxation on development as she has into most aspects of urban planning, she would have realised the totally different effects of land and improvement based taxes.

Taxes on land, of course, would stimulate development and redevelopment in city areas and reduce the cost of land to would-be developers. Thus the adoption of land-value taxation would help to lessen the plight of the poor. While it is conceded that even with a land-value tax system some rent subsidies might be necessary for the very poor, during an interim development period particularly, in ignoring the effects of taxes on improvements, Mrs. Jacobs has fallen down hard.

The system of subsidy which she has advocated (a refined version of which is to be introduced in the United States this year), will only perpetuate the fundamental cause of inadequate housing supply — the high and rising cost of urban land. While Mrs. Jacobs has pointed out that large gains are made out of dealings in slum property and that this needs to be tackled by fiscal means, she has not ventured to express positive views on the best ways of doing this.

Economics apart, however, Jane Jacobs is good to read. One of her most interesting observations is how specialisation in a particular land use, i.e. the Wall Street office area in New York, and the City in London, tends to diminish opportunities for choice. The higher value land uses tend to oust the less profitable ones, thus reducing diversity. Under a land-value tax system it is possible that this would not tend to happen to such a degree, since the effect of the tax would be to stimulate more rapid floor space increases where demand is high. Thus exceptionally higher per square foot returns would diminish.

Most city dwellers would agree, I think, that diverse, active, populated, vital areas are a city's most attractive features. The common thread between Soho, Monmartre, Venice and Amsterdam is the range of activities available within a short distance. These places have much in common with Greenwich Village. To see them fundamentally change would indeed be a pity. There is many a lesson for British town planners in this book, which should be made compulsory reading for all concerned with urban design.

Those who feel that better cities can only be achieved by wholesale acquisition and municipal redevelopment should take heed of the American failure. As yet, perhaps, we in Britain have not made so many blunders as our transatlantic brothers. We are nevertheless in danger of so doing. The hand of the town hall throws an ever larger shadow across our urban twilight area: the scale of municipal housing is ever on the increase. Grassy banks and benign paternalism are no substitute for self help and private initiative. While bearing in mind Jane Jacobs' plea for improvements based on understanding of people's needs, the deeper implications of an unsatisfactory land tenure system need even closer study.