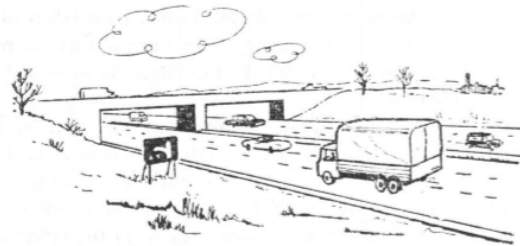


Groping in the Dark

BY P. R. HUDSON

"At fifty persons to the acre, the entire world population could live in West Germany"



LAND USE PLANNING is enjoying an international boom. Hardly a day goes by without the Press reporting a scheme for a New Town, redevelopment of a city centre, the preservation of the countryside, or the improvement of highways, water supply or drainage systems somewhere in the world. In Britain we have slowly-emerging regional land plans at the present time. In this we are not alone. Places as far apart as Paris and New York, Sydney and Moscow, Calcutta and Ciudad Guayana are also developing some form of regional approach to land planning.

President Johnson's legislative programme for the "beautification" of the United States is matched in the United Kingdom by the establishment of the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources. The publication of the outline plans for the Paris region is paralleled by news of land use/transportation studies for the whole of New South Wales. Clearly, the land planners are on the move. Where, it might be asked, are they going? What do they hope to achieve?

In some attempt to answer these questions the September edition of *Scientific American* was devoted to the subject of cities. The articles in this three hundred page, advertisement-packed copy are interesting for their breadth of scope and statistical information. Historical background to the land patterns of cities is supplemented by good photography and well-presented research data. For students, professionals and laymen interested in urban problems the magazine is top value at five shillings and well worth reading. For those who are interested in land *per se* many a gem is to be found.

Dealing with the "Urbanisation of the Human Population," Kingsley Davis postulates that by 1990 more than half the world's population will be living in cities of 100,000 people or more. Already thirty-six urban agglomerations have upward of two million in population. As society advances a greater proportion of people live in cities. One fifth of the world's population lives in countries where over half of the inhabitants live in urban areas. With rapid urbanisation social problems increase. The slums of Caracas, San Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, Amman and Baghdad contrast miserably with the commercial development of these cities. In Baghdad nearly half a million people live in self-built mud huts with no sanitation. Mr. Davis himself takes a pessimistic view of population increase stating that "the only way to stop urban crowding . . . is to reduce the rate of population growth."

Charles Abrams, writing on "Uses of Land in Cities"

puts things in perspective: "At fifty persons to the acre, the entire world population could live in West Germany. 70 per cent of the United States population lives on little more than 1 per cent of the nation's land area . . . For Urban Man there is no shortage of land. There are problems of effective use and organisation of this space, but essentially the urban system can provide him with plenty of room for work, for sleep, for play and for a manifold range of activities."

Going deeper into land use and "land rape" Mr. Abrams emphasises that allocation problems are of more importance than land "shortage" problems. Taking up the issue of urban squatters where settlements are fire and health hazards, he points to the lack of control available to city governments in the countries affected and the "compounding problem of land speculation and high land prices." While home site prices in parts of the United States represent only 10 per cent of total house costs, in many undeveloped countries land accounts for 60 per cent of the total. In other places high land costs are emphasised by low earnings. In some countries such as Ghana it is also difficult to establish site titles because of lack of registration.

Mr. Abrams continues: "To convert chaos into order, to make cities workable, to bar bad development and encourage the building of necessary facilities, governments must establish control over the use of land . . . Today almost everywhere, governments must reckon with the institution of the private ownership of land. The control of land use is a problem that no city in the world has solved to its complete satisfaction."

Turning to the tools available for reshaping cities, he names the three most important as regulation, taxation and acquisition. Taking each in turn he concludes that regulation "has not proved to be the master key," and that "the taxation of land is a far more effective method of controlling land use. It is a useful but far from common device for preventing the holding of land for speculative profits. Furthermore, the taxation of land helps governments to finance roads and utilities and to recover some of the rise in land values that accompanies such improvements."

Unfortunately, from this point on, Mr. Abrams slides from land tax advantages to property tax disadvantages, where the essential difference between land-based and improvement-based taxes is obscured. Commenting on the acquisition of land by governments he emphasises that this method gives complete control and ensures compensation

payments. Attitudes towards the public ownership of land vary from country to country. Nowhere is there a perfect system of land use control and Mr. Abrams calls for more research.

Other writers dwell on the advantages of state or municipal title to land to secure effective planning. Gövan Sidenbladh, writing on "Stockholm: A Planned City" notes how the erosion of the principle of a 1640 master plan, whereby land users leased sites from the government, has led to a contemporary situation where development is now impeded by the high cost of re-acquisition, where freeholds have been allowed to return to private hands and the site rent payments have been dispensed with. In a section on the "Renewal of Cities" Nathan Glazer gives account of the high costs and low benefit results of the United States urban renewal programme. Under present legislation large sites are acquired and cleared under condemnation powers and then the site costs are "written down" when the land is resold to private developers who will undertake approved schemes. In this way the high cost of acquiring crowded slum areas in which developers who have alternative fields of activity are not interested, is found from the taxpayer's pocket. The price is then reduced to suit the developer's pocket. It is well known that in United States cities slum land value is generally under-assessed and the decaying but highly profitable structures are given low book values.

Whatever the merits of land use and transportation planning, and I believe there are some merits, the problems facing the planners are the same throughout the world. There can be no doubt that justice apart, land based taxes would eradicate many of today's planning problems. It is a pity that its true advantages in an urban society have yet to be appreciated. There are indications, however, that the situation is improving. Meanwhile, the planners grope in the dark.

CHRISTMAS
AND
NEW YEAR
GREETINGS
TO OUR READERS
AND
CONTRIBUTORS
FROM THE EDITOR AND STAFF

GETTING IN QUICKLY

IN GENERAL, the process of progressive slum abolition in Great Britain has emerged out of pockets of owner occupation and the curtailment of rent control. In London areas such as Chelsea, Pimlico and more recently Greenwich, the outward and visible signs of painstaking restoration and modernisation of formerly neglected property are evidenced in high sale and rental prices. Where the market forces have been released it is not unusual to find examples of preservation where once attractive architecture of a former era has been re-instated to provide a novel contrast with contemporary design. Period residences in places with distinct characteristics such as Hampstead and Blackheath have been returned to former and profitable splendour although in some areas this has occurred only by local authority pressures of Building Preservation Orders.

In the United States where the housing market is far more flexible the process of rehabilitation has become big business and a specialist field. Unique districts like the German Village area of Columbus, Ohio, the Waverly Row sector of Philadelphia and the Vieux Carré quarter of New Orleans have become profitable investment signs for large scale revamps. One developer has disclosed returns of 19 per cent on restorations while another has "produced" an annual rent roll of \$27,600 from rehabilitation costs of \$150,000 added to acquisition costs of \$40,000. Where large enough areas can be acquired initially, the process of reinstatement can "up grade" dormant values nearby. Difficulty is then encountered as sale prices of run down property rise thus leaving a narrower margin for improvements.

Looking for prospective areas the specialist companies are reported* to be keeping their eyes open for land near central districts with clearly defined boundaries and promise of continuing improvement possibilities but where current rental values are low. In some cases local preservation societies formed by residents pressure local governments to draw up stiff regulatory codes to ensure that improvement work achieves the highest architectural standards. Such code enforcement is welcomed by the developers who are glad to co-operate in tightly defined sectors. While some streets still retain the facades of 100 years ago new amenities like courtyard swimming pools and off street parking are provided. Unfortunately the decrepit goose that lays the golden "period" egg raises its values to meet the fashion trends to a point of nil returns, as land values scoop off the cream.

There can be no doubt that land value taxes in such circumstances would do much to ensure continued improvement and perpetual rehabilitation — on both sides of the Atlantic land values being channelled back to the consumer of the product.

*House & Home (USA) August, 1965.