



# Private or State Town Planning?

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"The public planner of a new town is cocooned from first to last in a suffocating featherbed of statutory protection" (Prof. A. W. West)

A STATIC ELEMENT in all town planning is inevitable because the planners concerned are limited to their own vision of contemporary uses of land. If they are to overcome this and keep abreast of progress, they must allow for continuous change, for the free play of individual ideas and initiative, otherwise with the passing of time the new town will become an anathema entangled in its web of hide-bound conceptions.

This is a problem which confronts all planning of land use whether the land be in State or in private hands. And whether town planning legislation, with its statutory rules and orders, frustrates enterprise to a greater degree in the private sector than it does in the public sector is of relative importance.

In a recent conference paper\* James Rouse, president of an American real estate development firm, gives his experiences in developing the new town of Columbia with capital from private sources.

Presenting an outstanding case in favour of private planning he states: "Ours was a democratic process of planning, for we always had to try to take the voting of the market into consideration . . . We called dozens of people around the United States whose opinion we respected . . . we sought a compatibility of purpose that had not previously been tied together in the productive way that a free society and a free market ought to be able to achieve."

Financial backing was obtained from big insurance companies and a bank, and the site chosen lay between two great cities, so risk was minimal. By means of publicity and consultation they got a relaxation of the zoning laws, and broke down local residential opposition. Indeed, if the ideal town is possible, they are on the way to achieving it, but Mr. Rouse's enterprise, in spite of its beneficial aspects was possible only because of the development company's land monopoly power; therefore there was not a completely free market and an element of arbitrary restriction must have been present. A free market and a free society cannot be said to exist under such conditions of land tenure, and changes in land use so essential to the growth and prosperity of the ideal town will

be hard to win.

Today the legislative processes of State-controlled and financed planning are so complex that even the creation of static development is in confusion. Indeed there is despair among the ranks of the planners and professor A. G. Ling (President of the Town Planning Institute) in his paper calls for a "radical simplification of planning procedures to give the freest possible conditions for creative effort within a mixed economy." He is doomed to disillusionment; the mixture is wrong; like oil and water the conflict will remain.

Professor Nathaniel Lichfield also supports the mixture and calls for government financial guarantees for private developers and says that the leasehold system should be used so that it is the initial developers who will get the benefits of rising ground rents, which would suggest that he favours the private appropriation of the rent of land.

Professor W. A. West, whilst pointing out that private planning preceded legislative planning by hundreds of years, spotlights the penalising effect of State planning.

"Planning there must be; but statutory planning, legislative planning, compulsory planning, under the Acts, has frustrated enterprise so much that it has tended to destroy the dynamism of the market forces. The removal of a very great part of it would certainly inject a very considerable vitality into our development and our economic life, and we very badly need this. Only then can we possibly see the true cost of the services we want to provide."

The private planner, he points out, has to labour under the stimulus of competition, whereas the public planner of a new town is "cocooned from first to last in a suffocating featherbed of statutory protection." What they all fail to realise is that town planning, public, private or mixed, is merely one link in the process of the production of wealth, and so long as any element of monopolistic or authoritarian restraint remains, creative effort must suffer frustration and social progress be hindered.

Let economic rent of land be used for essentially communal purposes; abolish all taxation on labour and capital in the production of wealth and leave the people free to work out their own individual destiny.

\**Private Capital for New Towns* (five conference papers). Occasional Paper 28. Institute of Economic Affairs, 7s. 6d.