

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL - 18
Harlow: Another Point of View

c/o 201 E. 28th Street
New York 10016

March 1969

Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The burden of Mark One communities like Harlow is that the Garden City philosophy which shaped them, despite its charm and nearly idyllic view of semi-industrial semi-urban life, has proved thoroughly inadequate. The goals of Garden City type communities were based on reaction to the evils of the nineteenth century English industrial cities. London, Birmingham, Manchester were overcrowded, foul, unhealthy, inhumane. Ebenezer Howard and his followers were committed to small, self contained, tidy towns, genteel in every scale. Sturdy English workmen would live in clean homes, walk or bicycle to sturdy little factories, earn their wages with long hours of hard honest work, and in the twilight retire to plots in the agricultural greenbelt to tend the allotment gardens which supplemented the family diet. On Sunday the family would walk to the park for happy recreation. Etc. etc. etc. The dream was partially based in historical myth about the habits of the English and partially in the notion, which consistently cripples planners, of technological apex. Ebenezer Howard wrote at the turn of the century assuming that England was roughly as industrialized as it could be. In adapting Garden City ideas under the New Towns Act of 1947 which aimed to control urban growth and handle "overspill" (and ill housed) urban populations, no one understood the consequences of technological changes, or anticipated the next revolution of consumer expectations. It was well and good to talk of self contained communities with economic balance and opportunities for all when the only way out of town was by foot or train. But when there is widespread car ownership people are not bound to live, work and play in the same area at all, so they don't. In the Road to Wigan Pier, George Orwell mused aloud that if Britain ever lost her Empire then "we'll all live on herring and potatoes." The Empire was lost, yet families turn their allotment gardens into garage space and spend the twilight hours in front of the telly.

By the mid-fifties most of the philosophic-scale flaws of the Mark One towns were realized, if not fully appreciated. The next clump of designations advanced from country-cozy, greenbelted satellite towns for 60-70,000, and few cars, to high density towns for 90,000 and cars (Cumbernauld). By the mid-sixties the implications of open ended technological urbanization seemed to have registered and new designations were issued for cities to rise on regional scale, in sizes of 25,000, and 500,000. Runcorn, Washington and Milton Keynes will incorporate existing villages and create new town sized subdivisions as well as experiment with transportation systems and new design ideas.

But what about those flawed old new towns? I went and lived in Harlow because I was interested in the attitudes and patterns that develop in a planned community over a long enough period of time for at least one generation to grow up. I was fascinated by many of the social premises, some explicit, many implicit, that were built into the first new towns and now can be observed and in certain instances must be altered. Those premises range from the extreme importance placed on the neighborhood unit (which is being eased and adapted in newer new towns) to the notion that in the working classes young people go into marriage directly from the parental home (which was the rule, but is less so). I was persuaded by interviews with second generation residents of Harlow and other evidence that despite increased mobility, Harlow's limitations in vision and construction, and other factors that a strong, and very English sense of home-place exists, in other words, that they want to stay in Harlow to live, work, and raise their families.

I was more interested in Harlow as a social experiment than as an economic investment. When I went back to Harlow in January I went to talk with Ben Hyde Harvey, General Manager of the Harlow Development Corporation. Hyde Harvey is a practical man whose background was in accounting and whose present interest is his retirement. He is a difficult man to interview because, shy and retiring by nature, he has been asked every conceivable question about Harlow and the HDC innumerable times by guests, civil servants, industrialists, journalists, residents, even royalty. So, politely, he endures an interview. He settles behind his immaculate desk, folds his hands over his banker blue waistcoat, smiles wanly, and waits to hear which inevitably familiar question will punch up first. His careful, softly spoken answers have a faint air of recitation. Their tone and content are in restrained contrast to the proselytizing rhetoric of the romantics, revolutionaries and showmen of some of the other British and European new towns.

Hyde Harvey was, by his own admission, greatly influenced by the second of the Development Corporation's three chairmen. The first was the redoubtable Sir Ernest Gowers, the civil servant best remembered as the author of the curt admonition, "Plain Words." The present chairman is Sir John Newsom, the eminent educator. The chairman during the fifteen years of Harlow's greatest growth was Sir Richard Costain, a millionaire contractor. While Sir Richard did not allow his firm to bid on Harlow contracts, he freely lent the Development Corporation his staff's expertise and advice. Sir Richard's businesslike attitude also influenced Eric Adams, the Corporation's original General Manager.

Modestly, Hyde Harvey dismisses the role of the Development Corporation in building and running the town as "no more than that of any other large (real) estate management firm." The charm of the analogy is that it ignores the many masters of a public corporation: the Corporation members, the civil servants in the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, the philosophic mentors of the Town and Country Planning Association and other disciples of Ebenezer Howard, the industrialists, not to mention the residents. Moreover, the comment flatters Hyde Harvey's sober entrepreneurial view of his own job.

He prefers businesslike proof of Harlow's success. Within Harlow's adult population (those over 15), 90 per cent of the males and 51 per cent of the females are working steadily in either full or part time jobs. Eighty-seven per cent of them are employed in Harlow. This particular fact is very much in keeping with that Garden City goal of economic self containment at a population of from 60-70,000. According to Hyde Harvey this economic self sufficiency is not merely an index of Harlow's vitality, it is key to the community.

In spite of Hyde Harvey's non-ideological view of new towns and management problems, he credits Harlow's commercial success to an industrial recruitment policy devised by the Development Corporation in the planning phase and followed closely over the years. Constant reverential incantation has given the policy a gospel quality that suggests that the distance from slogan to catechism is sometimes merely inflection.

No single industry shall dominate the town.

No single firm shall employ more than ten per cent of the total working population (now projected as 30,000).

There shall be as wide a spread of industry as possible to protect the town in times of national economic slump.

Growth industries will be particularly welcome.

Industries with opportunities for school leavers and apprentice programs will be particularly welcome.

Progressive firms with good management history will be particularly welcome.

Perhaps better than most of his staff and the residents, Hyde Harvey is aware of the contradictions of Harlow's inherent Garden Citydom. To begin, Harlow had less natural advantages than, say Crawley, which is located south and east of London, midway between the city and the resort coast ideally located for development. Harlow is north and east of London, in the undeveloped, less attractive direction. But now it is well on its way to becoming a modest regional commercial and educational center.

The second generation is coming of age. Thus far existing firms have been able to absorb school leavers seeking employment in Harlow. Moreover, the two most prestigious (and, quite coincidentally, most handsomely housed) new firms in town, British Petroleum and the publishing house, Longman's, draw on the growing pool of clerical and trained office workers. More than 2,000 people are doing part-time studies at the Technical College in the Town Centre, most of them are both Harlow residents and employees.

Looking to the future, Hyde Harvey is concerned that there may not be enough jobs for the least mobile youth, those who do not qualify for apprenticeships for study and advanced courses at the Technical College or other skilled employment. But

in the Garden City-Mark One tradition Hyde Harvey must think ahead in self sufficient, balanced terms, of opportunities for all.

Although he himself has lived "above the shop" all these years, in a flat at the top of Harlow's first high rise building, Hyde Harvey has no illusions about social experimentation in Harlow. He lived in Harlow because he felt it was part of his job, that he could not "sell" Harlow to an industrialist considering coming to the town if he himself were not a resident. And he has grown more than used to it, he is genuinely fond of the place. While he has bought a retirement cottage not too far away, suddenly he can't imagine leaving Harlow for more than weekends. But he has no expectation that Harlow will ever be a socially "balanced" community. Indeed, he assumes that "the British executive will always prefer to live in a rural village." He fully appreciates the active political participation in local government by the young middle class residents especially the scientists, but, one gathers he differentiates them from management, and the upper classes.

It is interesting to note, incidentally, that despite his position and long residence in Harlow, Hyde Harvey is curiously anonymous and totally uncontroversial. The Development Corporation particularly in the earlier years when there was no local participation on the board at all and no local government at all, exercised sweeping powers. While the Corporation is the natural object of resentment, anger, and frustration, it is always directed to the Corporation as a body. The General Manager is never drawn into public controversy. Indeed, he particularly enjoys telling stories of his adventures in Harlow, talking to people in shops, on construction sites, at bus stops, in school, about the Corporation, or even the General Manager, knowing his face, as mild mannered as Clark Kent's, is not recognized.

A man with a clean desk, Hyde Harvey is satisfied knowing that within the established limitations the Harlow Development Corporation has done a good job of town building. He thinks Harlow must grow beyond present planning projections which call for a population limit of 90,000.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Eden Ross Lipson". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Eden Ross Lipson

Received in New York April 24, 1969.