

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL -2
See America First II.
Radburn Lives!

32 West 73rd Street
New York, N. Y. 10023
13 March 1967

Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, N. Y.

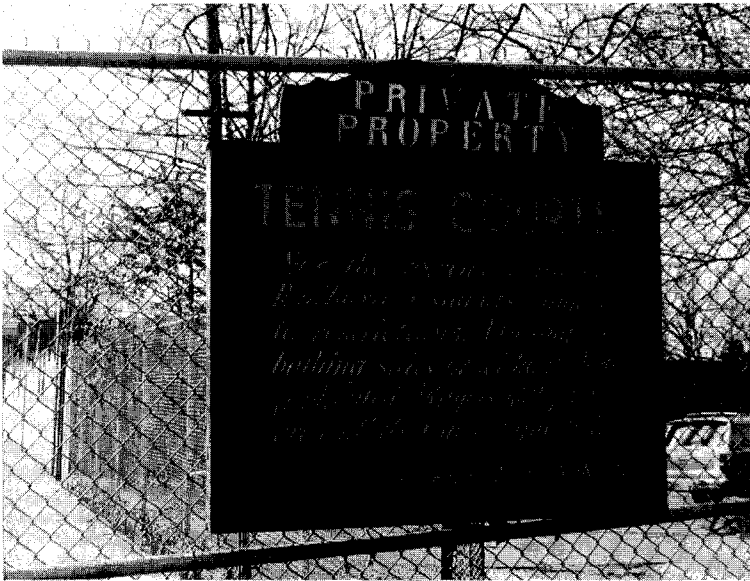
Dear Mr. Nolte:

They - the city planners, the urban critics, the socially conscious bureaucrats, - talk about Radburn, New Jersey as though it were a champion race horse. A champion like . . . Native Dancer, great in its day, better in memory, and most productive as stud material. In a way "they" are right.

When Radburn was planned and built in the late 1920's, it was praised at home and abroad. It was a self-proclaimed "New Town for the Motor Age!" It was famous. Newspapers wrote about it, college students and tourists by the busload trekked through the Jersey farmland to walk its paths and peer at its internal parks. They came to see the future, and the future looked promising. But the Depression limited the size of the dream, and after the War, the land boom hid Radburn in the midst of the suburbia it was intended to be an alternative to; still the legend grew.

Now, as you know, "New Towns" are the thing. More than 175 developments across the United States are calling themselves "New Towns." Someplace in their promotional literature they all refer to Radburn . . . the American pioneer! The Great Experiment! The Radburn Plan! It is a myth.

But Radburn lives. People who go to see it now cross the George Washington Bridge and drive past the Bergen Mall where, among the newer department stores, Alexanders' abstract mosaic wall brightly glares across the parking lot at cars passing on Route 4. The pilgrims are most likely to be young planners and foreign dignitaries coming to pay their respects and survey the remains of a beginning. The local merchants don't really understand why they come, nor do most of the younger residents. Radburn is just a small part of the Borough of Fair Lawn. Legally, it's the Radburn Association - 678 families who maintain three parks, two swimming pools, tennis and archery courts, and some pathways that run between the prim houses. The Motor Age, the holocaust Radburn was born to conquer, has surrounded Radburn and hidden it from view.



The Association has difficulty keeping outsiders off the tennis courts. The swimming pools are carefully supervised. Last year 870 school children were issued R.A. swim cards.

traffic." That plan, as every resident of Fun City in the '60's knows, still works, especially on Sundays.

Once upon a time, when the world was young, the stock market booming, and America was bursting with energy and splitting its still 19th-Century urban seams, Radburn began. It was going to be a Garden City for America. Its plan derived from two primary sources: the work of Ebenezer Howard, author of the oft-quoted but little read "Garden Cities of Tomorrow" and founder of Letchworth and Welwyn, and from the design for New York City's Central Park - the work of Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux. Central Park originally had four separate traffic systems with roadways, as Clarence Stein summed it up for "vehicles, equestrians, pedestrians, and outside

To describe Radburn and appreciate its impact in legend, one must begin with a number of qualifications. The goal of the City Housing Corporation, initially, was to build a real Garden City. But the industrial future of the area around the tract of land they found, and could afford, seemed dim even in the boom of the 20's. So, from the list of absolute characteristics of a Garden City, as set forth by Howard, they scratched industry and economic self-sufficiency even before they began. People who live in Radburn would either commute to New York City (16 miles), or nearby Paterson (2 miles). (Interestingly, even before the construction of George Washington Bridge, most worked in New York. They still do.) Next, according to the book, a Garden City must have an agricultural green belt, surrounding and protecting the core. The City Housing Corporation took options on some of the surrounding farmland with the hope of extending the development of residential Radburn someday, but they could not afford to build and still have money left for a green belt. So Radburn never had that claim to Garden City-ness either. During the Depression, the Corporation lost its options anyway. It was finally dissolved - leaving the Radburn Association as the caretaker of the unfinished dream.

Pilgrims go to visit Radburn because it is an experimental suburb, not really a New Town, or as it claimed, a new "urban" form. Indeed, in many ways it was deeply anti-urban. Still, the Radburn plan dealt with the problems of residential land use and road safety in ways dramatically different from any other American construction at the time,

and in both areas it marked important innovations.

Radburn isn't marked on highway maps today. Getting off high-speed Route 4 at the sign marked Fairlawn, you have to ask for directions. A gas station owner in the middle of one large anonymous development anxiously wonders why you want to go to Radburn. He says, "It's just a part of Fairlawn. Once it was pretty exclusive, but lately it's been infiltrated just like everywhere else." Startled by his pointed selection of words, you follow his directions, ". . . straight, left at the light, etc. . ." and you peer curiously into driveways and schoolyards, not quite sure if you are looking for Negroes, Jews, or both.

In 1950 Clarence Stein, who was the chief architect, and, with Henry Wright, the town planner of Radburn, wrote a gentle polemic called "Toward New Towns in America." (Recently, the MIT Press has brought out a paperback edition.) In the flush of current interest in cities generally, it has a prominent place in many book stores and sells well. The book is generously illustrated, a systematic review of a series of experimental American residential developments beginning with Sunnyside Gardens and Radburn. Going to Radburn, you tuck a copy of Stein's book under your arm as Baedeker.

You are thus forewarned that you will not be able to see the validity, charm, or perhaps, genius of the Radburn plan from the street. Indeed, the very idea of the plan was to get away from the street, to isolate its various service functions and demean its sociable aspects in hopes that they might wither away from consciousness entirely. Radburn turns away from the street because the car dominates it, and the car is inherently evil and dangerous. The result is, instead of street corner society, a social form that might be called private park cameraderie.

Actually, the only way to see Radburn as an entire, different, special unit within the general suburban sprawl, is from the air. In an aerial photograph taken in 1955, when the surrounding land had already been entirely covered by houses, one can see the interior parks forming Radburn's green spines, the housing clustered on cul-de-sacs, and the separated roadways, etc. Should you be unable to perceive those characteristics immediately, you could still identify Radburn by its landscaping, conspicuously lush and dense.

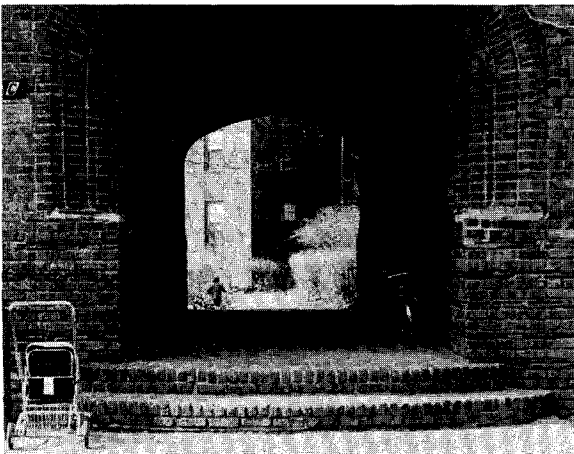


Looking down a park path toward a cul-de-sac. The parks are accessible only by foot.

An integral part of the Radburn plan and the design of its "super-blocks", was the notion of turning houses around so that the living parts of the house face, not the street with its garbage cans, mailmen and delivery vans, but the green parkland. Thus, from the narrow streets and dead-end turn-arounds you see only the service parts of houses: gaping garage doors, pantries, and kitchens. Standing in the park, you look across the narrow footpaths toward the living quarters, past tiny private yards, usually separated by dainty, mini-picket fences. Perhaps they were built in deference to Robert Frost's admonition that "Good fences make good neighbors", but more likely it was to keep dogs and children off flower beds. Generally they look too low to do that efficiently.

Radburn offers a variety of housing, mostly with brick or brick-and-clapboard facades. There are some two-family houses, some houses with garage and breezeway attached to the neighbors', one rather large nearly-Gothic apartment complex, and the rest detached single-family units. In "The City in History" Lewis Mumford mentions that the oldest small houses in Mohenjo-Daro, a city that dates to the third millenium B. C., were slightly larger than the five-room house he once occupied in Sunnyside Gardens which the City Housing Corporation viewed as a "model housing estate." Tolstoy answered the question "How much land does a man need?", but proportion and scale of residential dwellings in the relatively modern world can sometimes serve as an index of social values as well as economic possibilities. In the 20's, insofar as middle-class housing was concerned, people thought small. Remember the Rodgers & Hart songs - "We'll build a new room/ a blue room for two room," and "There's a small hotel"? Well, Radburn housing is "small."

The Radburn parks are referred to as "A", "B", and "R" because the streets and paths around them begin with those alphabetically consistent letters.



The Abbot Court apartment buildings are connected by passageways to a footpath leading into the park. Needless to say, it is the "A" park.

Jane Jacobs, in her book "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," points out that modern planners persistently confuse overcrowding (too many people in a room), with high density (too many buildings to an acre). And while the conditions, in cities, often do occur simultaneously, that is not necessarily the case. Mrs. Jacobs goes on to suggest that low density combined with overcrowding often results in urban slums, and she gives some specific examples. In the six years since her book was published a number of the sample districts (now Negro), have produced summer riots. Hough in Cleveland is one, Los Angeles' Watts, classically another. Others constantly simmer near the boiling point - Oakland, California, parts of Detroit and Philadelphia, the East Bronx in New York.



Houses back onto the street. New cars do not fit into the garages. Evidence of the morning garbage collection adds an unintended touch of "social realism."

Even if there is not overcrowding, Americans are discovering in post-war suburban experience that unrelieved low-density housing without sufficient recreational facilities (at least), produces social tensions.

There are a number of social values and concerns implicit in the Radburn plan. The first, of course, is the value of living with nature, facing and being part of the park system. This is what Lewis Mumford had described as, in its 19th century development, the romantic notion of the suburb - living in comfortable relation with "nature" instead of the city or the agriculturally productive countryside. Within this broad goal, the Radburn planners differentiated a variety of facilities for healthful recreation, building swimming pools, tennis courts, etc. for the residents at a time when such expensive frivolity on the part of the builder was considered heretical. Before the War, when the Borough of Fair Lawn's population was nearing 12,000 and the Radburn Association's recreation facilities were conspicuously desirable, there was jealous tension in the larger community. The Borough's population is now 40,000 and the public swimming pools are almost 15 years old, still the Radburn residents mention, with just a trace of smugness, their pools are open two weeks longer each year. And furthermore, their modest Association dues cover so much more than pool privileges.

The neighborhood is unavoidable and enforced. Membership in the Radburn Association is written into the deeds: annual dues are determined on the basis of the Borough's tabulation of assessed value. The average family pays about \$160. a year; the range is from \$100. to \$270. The Association maintains the parks, clears the paths, runs the pools, etc., and sponsors summer programs for resident children, as well as community facilities in the Grange building headquarters. (Originally the Association was housed in the Plaza building; they moved to the Grange in 1952, and the Plaza building is now part of a medium-sized, albeit drab, shopping center that runs along Fairlawn Avenue, dividing Radburn North Super Block I from Radburn South - Super Block II. The once-famous overpass that straddled the Avenue so that school children wouldn't have to cross against automobile traffic has long since been torn down.) The only administrative difficulty the Association admits to having with the rest of the Borough is policing the tennis courts. Since the Borough has nothing comparable, the temptation to outsiders to use them seems to be enduringly strong.

Perhaps because of its recreational facilities, Radburn did develop a positive neighborhood spirit early in its existence. Sixty of the original families still live there. While many adults retired elsewhere after their children were grown, a significant number of Radburn-raised people are living there now: the turnover of families is very low, about 24 a year, and they usually leave because of job transfers.

In the inflated real estate market of 1929, houses at Radburn sold for \$8,000 to \$12,000. In today's market the prices range from \$17,000 for half of a two-family house to \$50,000 for one of the "estate" houses (a few homes on one street now include extra 100 foot lots in the rear purchased a few years ago as a barricade against potential development.) The average house in Radburn goes for \$23,000 to \$27,000. The Radburn school, which originally served only Radburn's children, now draws from the entire built-up, area. The schoolyard opens onto one of Radburn's parks, and all the children seem to play there. The two Negro boys I met in school yard near the traffic underpass (which still delights the children and keeps them off the street above), I later learned, do not live in Radburn.

When I asked one man who works in Radburn to describe the people who live there, he seemed confused, so I suggested attempting a white or blue-collar breakdown. "That's no good today," he said, "some of those engineers go off in the morning wearing sport shirts, they make a lot more money than I do, but they don't dress as nice." The traditional suburb is economically homogeneous, one class with tradespeople and service personnel brought in from outside. Radburn is no exception.

Suburbs are nothing new in history: as long as there have been cities suburbs have existed. Typically, cities are, and always have been, crowded to the point of perpetual sanitary and hygienic hazard. As Sholom Aleichem said of a town with crowded streets and no visible plan "Why should there be vacant space when you can build something on it? Isn't it written that the earth is to be inhabited, not merely to be gazed at?" So long as cities have been busy and filthy, those who could afford it have delighted in "a country place." When the word suburb slipped into the English language during the Middle Ages, it simply referred to the land outside the city walls, land usually used for residential purposes. The notion that it was more healthful to raise children outside the city walls has its beginnings in the immemorial reality of urban conditions. Then, as now, women and children remained behind in the fresh air, while men commuted to the urb, or its equivalent, to make their living. The outer limits of suburban development were established by transportation facilities available. In the 19th century industrial cities reached new pinnacles of filth: suburbs for the upper and middle classes flourished. Rail and trolley lines, with stations 3 to 5 miles apart scattered the small, separated communities in deeper bands around the cities. Then came the car.



In early afternoon most children are in school; the parks are empty except for occasional women who stroll by on the way to the grocery store.

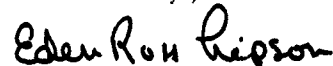


The number of people able to move out of the city "for the children's sake" increased tremendously with the advent of the private, family, car. The park suburb lost much of its characteristic and charming open space to ill planned, expensive and often hazardous roadways. In that way the car really changed the "nature" of the "natural" suburb. The Radburn plan is fundamentally about sustaining the best of the suburb, making it perpetually green, recreational, and safe again for children in spite of the car. Mumford says "both childhood and the suburb are transitional stages." If play is the work of children, it is also the focus of the suburb. To the urbanite the concentration of suburban energy and enthusiasm on recreation to the exclusion of other kinds of human endeavor (commercial, industrial, artistic, etc.) is alarming. It should not, however, be surprising in a nation that worships youth and leisure. While it seems to appeal to Americans, the notion of the universal suburb is a contradiction in terms. Identity as a suburb is based on accessibility to, but separation from, the density and diversity of a city, not another suburb.

Stein concluded that Radburn was "a splendid venture: a voyage of discovery in search of a new and practical form of urban environment to meet the actual requirements on today." The real urbanity of the form is still debatable. As for practicality, it is precisely Radburn's quaint technological obsolescence that makes visiting it a pilgrimage to a shrine. Modern stoves and refrigerators don't fit in the kitchens. Even medium sized cars are too big for the garages and narrow lanes. The sight of that symbol of suburbia - the station wagon - trying to get into, or worse still, out of, a cul-de-sac is both funny and sad, though it does make the passerby think anew of the problem posed. Only the parts of Radburn free of technology - the parks - have aged with perfect grace. Perhaps that in itself is a lesson.

In the 1930's students at Columbia College took field trips to Radburn as a part of the required Contemporary Civilization course. A graduate of that period was startled to learn that I had been there last week. "I remember it," he said, "it was an interesting place. But the field trip I really enjoyed most was the all night visit to the Fulton Fish Market."

Sincerely,



Eden Ross Lipson