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Planned Urban Parenthood

The advertised topic of this talk*, Planned Urban Parenthood is actually the laughing title of a book I'm writing about my adventures in the wonderful world of new cities and new towns. It refers to the glib explanation I once gave for studying the subject at all, which was that new towns were, for a time, hailed with the same kind of enthusiasm that greeted birth control pills, as the panacea cure to urban ills. Without questioning the proposition I began to examine the consequences, and set off looking at older new towns to see if and how they worked.

It is an American conceit to pretend that the "Urban Crisis" is something we invented. The components of what we are now calling the urban crisis - pollution, overcrowding, slums, blight, and ghettos, seem, unfortunately to be part of the pattern of growth of thriving industrial cities.

The New Town Movement was provoked by basically the same urban crisis which reached the acute stage in England at the end of the 19th century. By the time its solutions were applied on a meaningful scale it was the middle of the 20th century and those answers were found sweetly, but pitifully, inadequate. The problems remain and the English continue to experiment with ways of shaping urban growth under the aegis of the New Towns Act of 1947, but everyone there seems to understand that they are now building new cities.

For reasons inconsistent with the great American tradition of pragmatic eclecticism, there is a debilitating insistence on orthodoxy that chokes off almost every discussion of new towns. Praised or damned, new towns are always thought of in terms of a very rigid, and I think obsolete, set of criteria.

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* This newsletter was first presented as a public lecture at Yale University a month ago.

The detractors do have a lot going for them. The rhetoric of 19th century new towns is almost as awful as Jane Jacobs says it is. It reeks with righteousness, chirping birds and happy workers. Moreover, Garden Cities, according to the prescriptions of Ebenezer Howard as embellished by Lewis Mumford and visualized by Clarence Stein, among others, have just about nothing to do with the way we in modern America live, or want to live.

Medium sized towns are dying all over the country. Core cities are dying. Suburbs, whose possibilities Howard did not consider and which his disciples have reviled, are sprawling endlessly. They, in their ever-mutating forms, are what is happening in this country and in every other country facing post-industrialization on wheels. To run around building self-consciously buffered little toy towns of 60,000 in the United States in hopes of securing them against the rest of the nation is basically nonsense.

You may have noticed that I have not dispaired of really small towns because, oddly enough, they continue to be born at a steady pace and represent an interesting phenomenon worthy of another talk.

In any event, having set orthodoxy aside, I found it much easier to look for new towns in America and I've found quite a few. The criteria I've used have had nothing whatever to do with green-belts, architectural unity, or even verity, and a great deal to do with two key variables - rapid purposeful growth and the new kinds of living problems it creates for the unrepresentative cross section of the population it attracts.

In other words I think new towns are unnatural, but not so much physically unnatural as socially and economically. My mostly social definition has built-in limits. The life cycle of a new town is conception, birth, childhood and adolescence. When it reaches maturity it ceases to be a new town. When the demographic curve is no longer skewered, when the town contains grandparents, and retired residents as well as young jet-setters and their off-spring, it's not a new town any more.

The English mark one new towns, the Garden Cities, taught us that a lot of the "rules" of planning, physical planning, were wrong, and that a lot of the tools of economic manipulation were wrong, and that a lot of implicit assumptions about the permanence of the rigid class system were explicitly wrong. To that extent the towns nearly a million people call home are expensive mistakes. But they weren't mistakes, they were experiments. Because they were called new towns, capital N, capital T, and no social institutions in them were taken for granted, everything that has happened in them has been open for identification, labeling and analysis.

One of the most popular and wrong arguments against new towns is the myth of the so-called "new town blues." Back the phrase up against the proverbial wall and it refers, specifically, to the absolutely natural and understandable anxiety of realized isolation to which young married women, housebound with small children, away from female friends and relatives to call upon for companionship and advice, are particularly susceptible.

In the mid fifties the British press played up the new town blues as an unavoidable problem apparently restricted to new towns. Blues probably are unavoidable, but they are not restricted to new towns or Garden Cities, rather they are endemic to new communities. Happily, the British have studied the problems of the new towns as though they were unique. As a result, after more than twenty years there is quite a lot of information about phenomena like the "blues." Most of it reinforces common sense.

It is almost obvious that moving is much easier for working men and school-age children with active schedules and opportunities for making friends than for housebound women. This is now an accepted and acceptable axiom. Additionally, the cycle of "blues" can be anticipated. The worst spell comes about six months after moving when the house is fixed up, the first dishtowel needs replacement and the lady of the house discovers that life has not radically changed and only material problems have altered. The second spell usually comes after about two years in the town which is roughly when the house needs its first paint job. The third cycle is after five years. Incidentally, it is at those "blue" points that a family is most likely to leave an English new town, although few actually do.

The various new town development corporations quickly became attuned to the special social needs of new communities and have experimented with all sorts of ways to anticipate and combat them. Yet many of the carefully wrought public policies are, again, nothing more than the implementation of common sense. Community centers, even if they are nothing but shacks are ready when the first family moves into an area, parks, child care centers, small shopping areas with benches outside, all help. So does the simple fact of discussion. The very fact that the new town "blues" are labeled makes it easier for individual families to recognize and handle.

As I said, we have some new towns in America but we don't usually call them that, in fact, generally we don't call them anything Nor do we, at any level of government or public policy, pay particular attention to the special needs of new communities. Without recognition or assistance some of the social sores fester and occasionally burst into newspaper headlines. But they are soon forgotten, or else taken for granted by Middle Americans who have never imagined that there might be alternatives.

Tonight I'd like to tell you briefly about two places I consider new towns. They fit into a special category of de facto new towns created by the federal government, which, by rule of thumb, is not in the city building business except when it happens incidental to some project of very high national priority.

One of the places is now an incorporated city, the other is fifteen incorporated cities and a handful of unincorporated areas whose land mass is politically defined as a county.

Oak Ridge, Tennessee is one of the three so-called "atomic cities" built, in secret, during the second World War to house workers on the Manhattan Project. The other two, Los Alamos, New Mexico and Richland, Washington, are smaller, came later, and are, I think, less interesting.

The most fascinating thing about Oak Ridge is that it was built as a city at all. There was no reason to do it that way. There was no precedent for it. There were no criteria to guide or measure it. And, there was no political pressure on the army to build a city around the uranium processing plan instead of a standard work camp.

The key decision to lay out plans for a city, not a work camp, was made sometime in the fall of 1942, after the site in East Tennessee was surveyed and while the few residents of the long hidden valley were being moved out. Once decided the Army never looked back. The firm of Skidmore Owings and Merrill was given a topographical map of an unidentified area and commissioned to design a town with commercial facilities for 13,000 - in three days. The Corps of Engineers approved the hastily drawn sketch and asked John Merrill how fast he and his men could get to the site. Merrill replied apologetically that he didn't know because he didn't know where the site was. He was ordered to pack his bags and get to Penn Station. There he and his associates boarded a train for Washington and en route opened envelopes directing them to Knoxville, Tennessee.

There were no blueprints for the original core of Oak Ridge. Construction began immediately and the master drawings were passed from hand to hand. In the summer of '43 the second "plan" was put into effect and calling for a city of 42,000. By the end of the war there were 75,000 people living in Oak Ridge behind armed fences.

After the war the responsibility for the no longer secret but still walled city was transferred to the Atomic Energy Commission. As with the Army, actual day to day administrative responsibilities were contracted out to civilian companies. The AEC, like the Army before it, was entirely responsible for everything that happened behind the gates, a fact which had its silly side. Residents didn't so much as change their own light bulbs.

During the wartime phase it would have been difficult for the casual observer to distinguish Oak Ridge from a work camp. The so-called plan was, at best, a guideline to land use. Construction was hasty and used previously untested prefabricated materials. Landscaping was an undreampt of luxury. A dormitory was a dormitory, and a TVA flattop was the polite name for a construction shack. World War II trailers were much less comfortable than modern mobile homes. The single family houses of Oak Ridge, however, though thrown up with a hopeful life expectancy of twenty years, turned out to be unusually well designed and sturdy. Called "cemestos" after their siding, they were built along the hillsides generally on a back to front basis in order to minimize the length of utility lines. Thus because land moving equipment was scarce, private transportation difficult, and speed in construction the key, the living rooms of the about face houses looked to the lovely mountain views while the kitchens and bathrooms faced the unpaved roads.

Looking back at it, Oak Ridge was a remarkable physical and social experiment entirely by accident. The lonliness phase of "new town blues" didn't have much chance to develop as most of the women living inside the town walls worked. Oak Ridge was, however, without babysitters - either grandmothers or kid sisters or teenagers. So Oak Ridge developed more sophisticated child care centers 25 years ago than are being experimentally funded today.

The traditional neighborhood plan with elementary school and small retail shops at the hub was efficient rather than aesthetic. The hub was also the bus stop, for Oak Ridge had public transportation in those days (the town is nine miles from the plant and what is now the national laboratory). Necessity also forced the construction of multi-purpose facilities, anticipating another current vogue; for example, the movie theatre doubled as the church.

During the time Oak Ridge was behind walls, community organizations ranging from square dance groups to the symphony orchestra were lavishly subsidized by the Recreation and Welfare Association which got its funds from administering the beer monopoly.

The Atomic Energy Commission found the business of being landlord exasperating, time consuming and politically often embarrassing. The sale of property to residents of Oak Ridge, called the Disposal, began in the mid fifties and Oak Ridge was incorporated as a city in 1960. Today it struggles, as does every city in America, to make ends meet. In one obvious sense it is nothing more than a largish company town in which the company happens to be the federal government which grudgingly turns over an in-lieu-of-taxes payment, negotiated through the AEC. It is also a notable asset to East Tennessee, one of the points in a developing scientific research triangle with the University of Tennessee in nearby Knoxville and the North Carolina universities not too far away. A stunning number of the social organizations developed and coddled

during the days of federal ownership have survived and make Oak Ridge an unusually active community by social calendar standards.

By my social definition Oak Ridge is no longer a new town. The first generation of children are now grown, many have moved away. Grandparents and retired people live in Oak Ridge now along with the new generation. The city has no special treatment for its past, but some of the advantages of its freely experimental birth are lasting.

It may sound as though I have just contradicted one of my premises. I said earlier that the criteria I used in defining a new town were social rather than physical, and yet I ascribed much of Oak Ridge's success, at least implicitly, to physical amenities and planning. The crucial factor, in fact, was urgency, compounded by secrecy. The physical "amenities" were improvised, not designed. There was no architecture or philosophic planning involved. Facilities were a response to social problems not aesthetic decrees. To this day Oak Ridge is devoid of "architecture," yet because it was a successful new town it has matured into a real small city with relative ease.

Thus, far from contradicting my point, I think Oak Ridge helps prove it.

I find it very difficult to approach Brevard County, Florida, dispassionately. The astronauts may have gone to the moon in peace for all mankind but they took off from a man-made mess that is as fertile a setting for social problems as agar agar is for amoebae. In the last decade the National Aeronautics and Space Adminstration invested over a billion dollars in construction alone in Brevard County without expressing any real interest in the consequences that investment would have on a rural backwash. I don't know how to orchestrate the story because the extremes are so stunning - on the high side the drama, technical skill, even genius of the engineers who built Pad 39 and the Vertical Assembly Building and launched the rocket sending man to the moon, and on the other endless missed opportunities in every area - from needless pollution of water resources to proliferation of inadequate and inefficient mini-governments to flagrant abuse of equal opportunity in housing, jobs and education. The bell has begun to toll in Brevard County, the serious cutbacks in the boomland started over a year ago. Already it is a nervous, slightly desperate place.

Only a week ago a reporter for the New York Times finally observed that Brevard County was a "sprawling city," in effect. About time somebody else began to say so. Perhaps the best way to address the County-city-new town's problems would be to ask if its present situation - aggravated depression, severe economic reversal, social unrest, could have been avoided in any meaningful degree if it had been treated by NASA, a civilian agency, as a new town. I think the answer is yes.

Historically the east central coastal section of Florida was as empty and undeveloped as East Tennessee. The swampy land harvested mosquitos and oranges. Tourists going to Miami drove through on two lane U.S. 1, or sailed through the Intracoastal Waterway. The Navy built an air station at the southern end of the county during the second World War. Nothing happened. The Air Force took it over and renamed it Patrick Air Force Base. Nothing happened. Strange men cleared a missle range to test their new rockets in the swamps. And things began to happen.

Between 1950 and 1960 the population grew from 23,000 in three small cities and unincorporated areas to 111,000. By the end of the decade NASA was testing the first in the Mercury series, and the impact area of NASA-related personnel was moving north from Melbourne with the new installations. Brevard County is 75 miles long but only 15 miles wide.

Before the end of the 60's the population had peaked at just over 252,000 and started backsliding. The decision to build the Kennedy Space Center on Merritt Island was made in 1962 by the NASA administrators in Washington who studied cost proposals for seven alternative lunar launch sites, including such far out possibilities as Christmas Island, Hawaii and the Yucatan Peninsula. Getting documents out of NASA is probably easier than something, but I don't know what, nevertheless I did, finally, obtain a copy of the proposals.

I never cease to marvel that the Army thought building a city would help the Manhattan project. In obverse fashion I never cease to marvel that NASA was oblivious to its impact. There is a passing sentence in favor of the Merritt Island choice, noting "proximity to adequate community facilities - as housing." And that wasn't even true.

Due almost entirely to the initiative of a politician from the northern end of the county who had managed then Governor Farris Bryant's successful campaign and had been rewarded with a seat on the state Road Board, a Joint Impact Coordinating Committee representing NASA, the Air Force and the State of Florida was established. But it had no power and limited resources.

In the absence of even so much as moral suasion to do otherwise, land speculation, particularly in the central and northern parts of the county, was rampant. Developers bought, built and ran. The excuse for the isolated clumps of overpriced houses without sidewalks, sewers or paved roads, if one was offered, was that the county hadn't even required building permits until 1958 and couldn't keep up with "progress."

According to my criteria Brevard County certainly became a new town. Its growth was sudden, dramatic, and very purposeful. Its new population, mostly Southerners by birth, was uniformly young, skilled, fertile, and also wonderfully avaricious. While

NASA built space out on Merritt Island they grew used to fat salaries fattened still more by lavish steady overtime. And so, in short order, more people owned their own new homes and two new cars than in any other county in the country. Many also bought pleasure boats.

In the spurt years whole subdivisions were settled by employees of particular NASA contractors. The pseudo solidarity of these ersatz communities cracked even before men began switching jobs from contractor to contractor. Nevertheless employee associations were the primary community organizations. Even now supermarket window posters are more likely to promote "Grumman Wives' Bridge Club" or "MacDonald Picnic" than broader community activities. Another reflection of the fragmented growth of the county was the steady increase of ineffective political units. At one point there were 18 cities, 27 sewer districts and 19 special districts.

There is a great deal of sensitivity in the county about social investigation of any sort. It was one thing in the early sixties when David Brinkley showed the nation the row of bars and nightclubs along Cocoa Beach. By the time the National Enquirer, Cosmopolitan and Time magazine got through with the story, it was much more painful and embarrassing. Behind the sleazy journalism, however, there are two extreme stereotypes. Sin City and the Family Church.

Sin City is the bars, the much publicized rate of divorce, alcoholism, gambling and other evidences of anxiety which are, often as not, ascribed to the "aero-space syndrome." That syndrome rests heavily on the neuroses of engineers. In conversation with the Family Service Bureau, one of many social agencies that didn't get started until the late 60's and is always crowded, I heard a list of specific complaints. Many of them fell into the familiar categories I recognized as the "new town blues." When I mentioned the resemblance to several of the staff they were surprised, and quite possibly a little hurt. Everyone wants to be unique. But a good part of my reason for being there was to find evidence that what was happening in the county was not unique, merely unrecognized.

The theory of the Family Church seems to be "the family that plays as well as prays together can avoid the rest of the community entirely." A good example of a Family Church, and the county has several, is the First Baptist Church of Merritt Island with its congregation of 3,700, city block-large facilities including swimming pool, gymnasium, bowling alley, 58 classrooms, three ministers, 15 choirs and two bands, and Sunday night revival meetings that attract an average of 1,500.

Going back to the question, what if Brevard County had been organized, or even thought of as a whole as a new town? One answer by indirection, Brevard Junior College, the only real county-wide facility born with NASA's cooperation is already crowded

beyond its 1975 projections. Many other agencies like the Family Service Bureau, which serve the whole county, could have gotten started earlier instead of waiting for the situation to require immediate attention. In lieu of mini-city squabbling the county might have been better organized to find secondary employment opportunities, and industrial diversification to relieve the heavy dependence on NASA. Even now there is tri-partite, i.e. regional, discussion of a convention center. The last thing Brevard County needs is three convention centers, but the tendency now to think of the regions, South, Central, and North Brevard as irrevocably different is now quite fixed.

The improvement of the roads in the County - in lieu of public transportation - was primarily due to Max Brewer, the Titusville lawyer, not NASA, although it is quite clear that NASA would have spent more on roads if it had had to. Rather than involve itself in the matter of water pollution NASA ships in water from an inland county and allows the city of Cocoa to use some of it. New town or not, I find no excuse for NASA's standing back without commenting on rampant segregation of employment and housing opportunities.

There is a temptation to look at Brevard County with its evidence of spoiled, selfish, right wing, shortsighted voters increasingly frightened by the space cutbacks and say a pox on them. They brought it on themselves with their good old American greed. If they had cared, even without federal encouragement Brevard County could have emerged before now as a cohesive urban area.

That temptation brings me to the only two conclusions I will offer this evening. I went out looking for new towns in a particular category and found two, a mango and a papaya, for surely they are more exotic than an apple and an orange, and about as comparable. The impact is made by an agency (or industry) which attracts people. In a policy vacuum a small administrative decision can have astonishingly far reaching consequences which cannot show up on normal cost benefit analysis charts. This, I think, reflects not only the power of positive thinking, but also the Parkinsonian efficiency of bureaucrats in elaborating and amplifying their instructions. Look at Oak Ridge.

The second lesson is the regretable and much more familiar reverse. In a policy vacuum the failure to make even the smallest distinctions or gestures can have astonishingly far reaching consequences which cost surprisingly more, in monetary as well as social terms, than cost benefit analysts think. One could go on "if"ing about Brevard County all evening and, in the end, casting aside the philosophical questions of good, class and life style, conclude only that it will take federal investment and assistance to straighten out a new urban area created by federal investment.

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