NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL - 9
Cumbernauld:
Scottish New Town

c/o 101 Eaton Terrace
London SW 1
England
12 November 1967

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

"This is truly an international award. Our purpose is to call world wide attention to extraordinary achievement in urban design. Cumbernauld has set a standard for all the world."

So said Mr. Richard Reynolds, chairman of the Reynolds Metals Company last June as he presented a check for $25,000 and a placard solemnized by the American Institute of Architects to Cumbernauld, honoring the eleven year old Scottish new town as the best example of community architecture in the world. It was the first time the award, known as the R. S. Reynolds Memorial Award had been given.

Cumbernauld, unlike, for example, Tapiola, is controversial. There are two schools of thought. One, especially American, is wildly enthusiastic. The second, most politely summarized by an anonymous British planner quoted in the Town and Country Planning Journal after a visit two years ago, is "Thanks for a valuable experience, but, please, don't do it again." My usual point of investigation into the British new towns concerns long term, and, where possible, second generation social patterns and response to design, rather than design itself. Nevertheless, and not only because world wide attention, in America, has been drawn to Cumbernauld, I think it worth while to devote a newsletter to Cumbernauld as an experiment in design.

Slightly more than 22,000 people are living in Cumbernauld. The adults are mostly young, have small children, and are grateful for being out of Glasgow, a city that has, for the past century, taken perverse pride in the horror of its slum tenements. Despite considerable post war construction, Glasgow is still, unmistakably, overcrowded. The starting point for Cumbernauld was the creation of an overspill new town; to rehouse and provide employment for, according to the revised population estimate, at least 70,000 people. Four fifths of the number will come from Glasgow.

In their book on the British New Towns, Sir Frederick Osborne and Arnold Whittick considered Cumbernauld and remarked tartly, " ... architectural effect is not the starting point of planning. In housing the starting point should be family needs, and, if possible, family wishes. ... Good architectural effect, though it comes after social needs are satisfied, is not incompatible therewith."

Cumbernauld is the first Mark II new town. The fifteen new towns planned and begun in the late 1940's and early 50's followed certain characteristic design criteria which were, consciously or otherwise, both romantic and wishful. They had market square town centers surrounded by amoebic, separate neighborhood units. The planners bekieved ordinary people would not have cars so they happily laid out winding country lanes which meandered gracefully through the contryside. The notion of vehicular separation was Radburnishly adapted here and there, but, for the most part, traffic separation was an island of grass between road and sidewalk.

In accordance with traditional British desige for two storey homes with gardens, few apartment buildings of any cnnspicuous height were planned. Most housing was terraced with narrow back gardens. Terrace house, in American, means a row house. The newer, more fashionable, that is, hopefully more saleable phrase is "town house."

If they didn't think people were going to have cars, and they designed sprawling new towns, how did they expect people to get around in foul weather as opposed to fair? The planners believed and honestly expected public transportation to function well within the new towns, not just to connect them with other places on the hour when the bus came. For both economic and political reasons it didn't happen. Today, in Stevenage, Crawley, Harlow, to name three, if you time it right you can come or go from a specific neighborhood to the Town Center. But only by foot, bike or car can you conveniently get to another neighborhood.

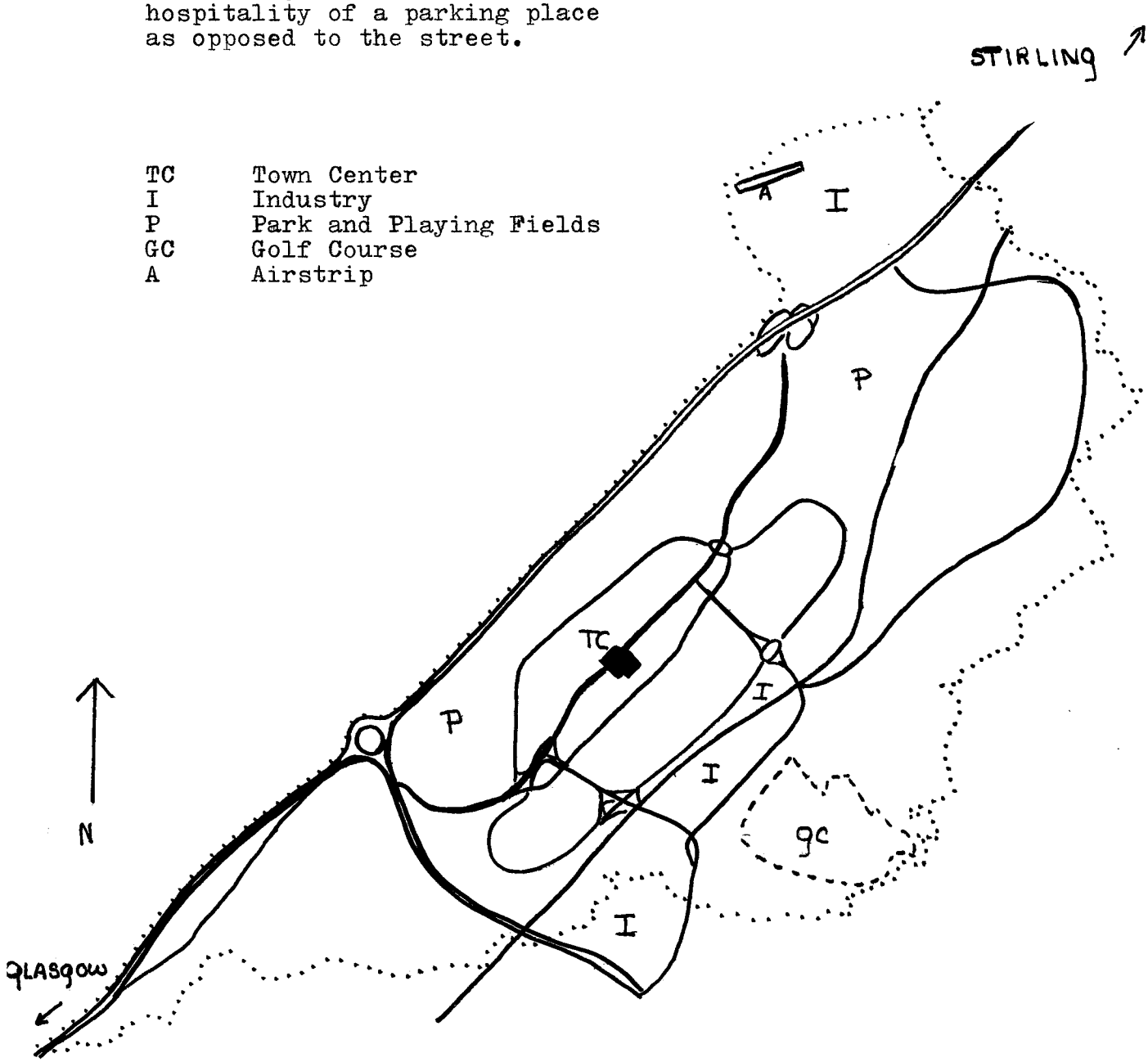
So, in assessing the new towns much was said and thought about transportation, and also about isolation, inward turning neighbor hoods, lack of community spirit because of lack of daily cross town contact.

The Motor Age of British planning was born, loudly, with Cumbernauld. They say it is coincidental, but if you look at the road plan semi-sideways, you can see the outline of a car. Cumbernauld has absolute vehicular separation. An unrelated footpath system rather than sidewalks, occasionally goes over, or under the roads, but never next to them. Vehicles have main roads, ring roads, and service or access roads which keeps traffic sorted out. Even before the introduction of the device called Barbara's Breathalizer, in honor of the present Minister of Transport who introduced it, Cumbernauld was boasting the lowest traffic accident rate in the British Isles. Lower, even, than the expected rate.

CUMBERNAULD

Cumbernauld is equidistant, along the main highway, from Glasgow and Stirling. The designated area is 4,150 acres: five miles running south west to north east, two miles wide. The main feature is a mini-mountain topped by the Town Center. Housing is on either slope of the hill concentrated near the vehicular roadways, but laced with independent footpaths as well. Cumbernauld is an experiment in high density; of 2,783 acres allotted to the town, only 820 will be used for housing.

Ultimately Cumbernauld will provide 103% garage/parking space in the residential areas, as well as 5000 spaces in and around the Town Center. 103% means that some night when you and your neighbors are home with cars parked, three of you can have guests and offer them the hospitality of a parking place as opposed to the street.



Cumbernauld is a very modern variation on a hill town, and upon the hill lies the controversy. The Mediterranean hill town is one of the most enduring and endearing physical arrangements for human life ever devised. The phrase conjurs up the sights, light, sounds, even the smells of sun warmed Italy. The mental picture of a hill town, dense, alive, vibrant even when dozing in mid afternoon heat is, in its way, as romantic as the English country lanes winding through cozy villages garlanded with roses. There is no reason why, adapted to the motor age and modern technology, new hill towns should not succeed. Providing you put them in the right places. As Arnold Whittick warned me sadly just before I went to see for myself, "It's the wrong site."

The most important and fundamental difficulty with building a hill town in Scotland is just that. Scotland isn't Italy. And, to make the simple truth more painful, Cumbernauld's mini-mountain is the most exposed single site in the Glasgow region. The climatalogical studies innocently assumed Glasgow weather which is dark, dank and wet enough. Empirical observations have subsequently been substantiated by patient examination of the records. Fourteen miles north east in Scotland is a long way. It is not imaginary; the complaints are not, as it were, psychosomatic. Cumbernauld IS colder, wetter and foggier than Glasgow, which means no matter what, or how, you build on top of that hogs back hill, it is very cold, very wet and very foggy.

Ralph Erskine, the English born architect who lives and practices in Sweden, is one of the leaders in the search for new community forms for extreme climactic conditions. He recognizes the charm of the classic forms, especially the Mediterranean ones, but he appreciates their natural requirements of sun, season, etc. Recently Mr. Erskine gave a speech at a conference held at Expo '67 a copy of which was forwarded to me by the ever vigilant and

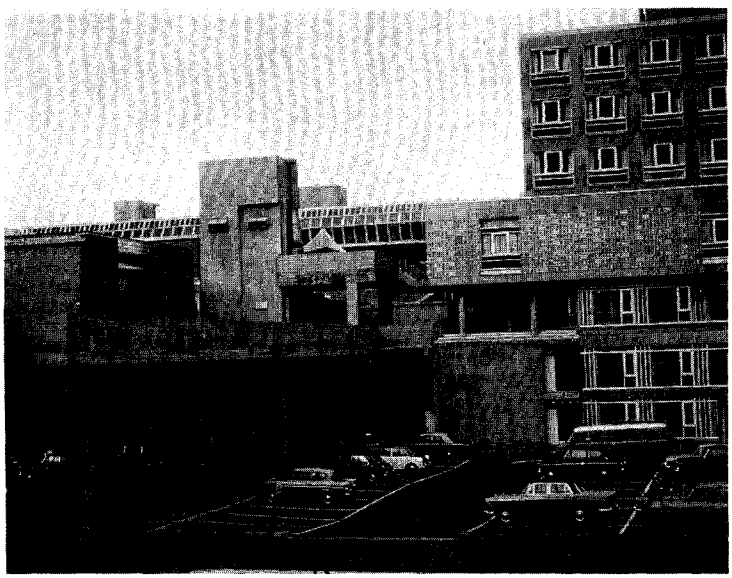
The Fort behind the play area and the terraced housing is NOT the Town Center, but a massive, very long apartment block.

thoughtful Arctic Institute. Mr. Erskine bemoaned the fact that while, for the first time, we have the technology and skills to search out and develop new forms for extensive human settlement in hitherto intolerable climates, we persist, for reasons of fashion or timidity, in copying classic forms in improper geographic settings. When he wondered aloud at the wisdom of a certain Scottish hill town there was no need to name names. There is only one.

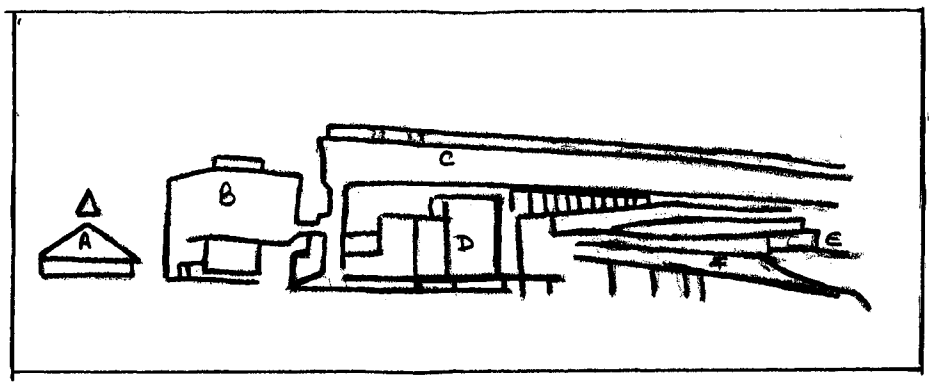
Keeping the difficulties of the site in mind, the question reasonably arises: was the plan for Cumbernauld developed from the characteristics of the setting, or, in fact, was it a more or less theoretical exercise in high density planning according to a set of impersonal, formal criteria? The question must be addressed to the two distinct sections - the Town Center and the housing areas.

The Town Center was planned as the focus of the entire town, not to be just the primary center for commerce and recreation but the only one. The initial planning proposals said it would "be planned to provide shelter from wind and rain and, if possible, warmth in winter ... by taking advantage of the hilly site it should be possible to provide a multi-storey centre with pedestrians and vehicles on different levels, with ample car parking facilities within easy walking distances of the shops... the scheme should be based on the pedestrian shopping street rather than the market square."

For the first ten years the residents of Cumbernauld made do with scattered, tiny general stores tucked into the ground floors

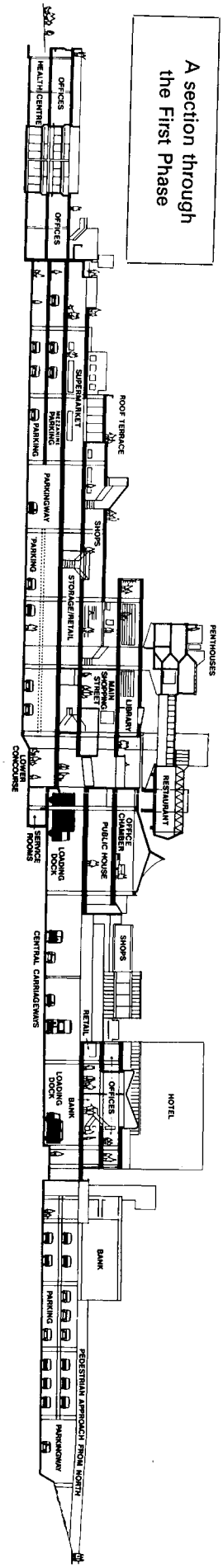


The steps of St.Mungo's Church offer a particularly fine view of one of the Town Center parking lots and the entrances to two of the Golden Acorn Hotel's six bars.

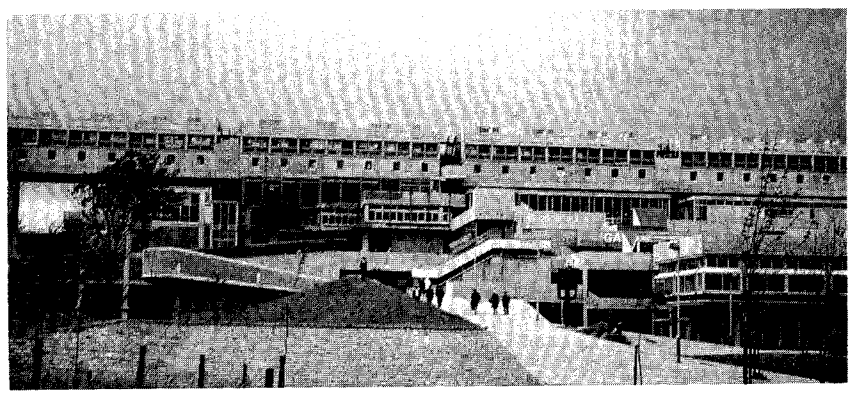


A St. Mungo's Church
B The Golden Acorn Hotel
C Penthouse apartments
D Offices
E Supermarket
F Pedestrian ramp

Notice the struggling saplings.



of a few apartment buildings, and the inadequate shops of old Cumbernauld village. The absolute lack of commercial, and, just as important., recreational facilities, increased the cost of living. The residents, however, were patient and stoic as they watched the foundations of the structure they sometimes call Fort Apache rise smack on the top of the mountain. Phase One, the first fifth (1/5) of the Town Center was dedicated, with due ceremony, by Princess Margaret last May. Already it is a colossal construction. When it is completed, some ten years from now, it will be a full half mile long, eight storeys high most of the way. Phase One includes: parking, pubs, offices, post office, hotel, the largest supermarket in Scotland, shops, banks, penthouse apartments, terraces, a health center, a dual carriage (divided) highway running through its bowels, escalators that sometimes work, elevators that don't work, assorted stairs, pedestrian ramps and pedestrian streets.



This is the main pedestrian approach from the south east. The health centre is on ground level to the right.

Still to come are: a technical college, sports centre, swimming pool, courts, police and fire station, movie theatre, dance hall, ice skating rink and a great many more shops, ramps, stairs and parking places. The Development Corporation will graciously remain settled in an old mansion in the woods a mile away.

Like everything else in Cumbernauld the Town Center is grey, stark, and abstractly handsome. From a distance in a light mist it is particularly exciting ...a fortress?...a castle?....something remarkable. Inside, despite the constant movement of people, it is profoundly dark and often dungeon gloomy. Eight miles south of Glasgow, in the Mark One new town of East Kilbride, a large new commercial section attached to the Town Center and also built on the closed pedestrian street idea is nearing completion. Though admittedly on a smaller scale, it is in bright

The children of Cumbernauld, of whom there are a great many, are disconcertingly blase about photographers of whom there seem to be an equal number. One boy looked up from his game and cheerfully called out "G'wan, you can take my picture, I'm not looking."

contrast to Cumbernauld, largely because great attention has been paid to artificial lighting to supplement nature's unpredictable largess. The linear labyrinth of Cumbernauld is stunning, complex, unfinished and by any standard, sophisticated. It may, in fact, be too sophisticated for its present population. It is the only place in any British new town where I've noticed graffiti on public walls.

Housing at Cumbernauld is widely publicized as adhering to the following catechism of admirable standards, which with suitable modifications of points b) and c) where appropriate, do, or certainly should, apply to all new towns.

a) Achieve integration of dwelling design and layout.

b) Maximum number of houses as opposed to apartments.

c) Use fine views available from all parts of the main hilltop area.

d) Secure adequate daylight and sunlight standards.

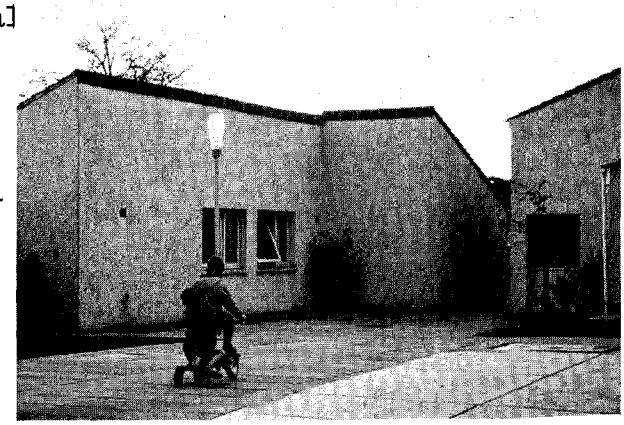
e) Maximum privacy for principal rooms and gardens.

f) Maximum flexibility in the use of space within dwellings.

g) Maintain amenity standards within housing areas with careful attention to design of public spaces, including details of fencing, walling, paving and landscape.

Given those critera, and the hill site limitations, a grand total of 820 acres of the 4,156 total is devoted to housing. Roughly 50% is apartments, in either low (4-5 storeys) or high (8-12 storeys). The popular yearning for house and garden is less strong in Scotland than in England; still, this is a very high percentage. The terraced housing is built to a density, which, even when cleverly arranged, is startling - an average of 26.3 houses per acre. By way of comparison, American suburban housing rarely goes higher than 6,7 or 8 houses per acre; in other British new towns the high figure is 16 or so.

All houses have either southerly or westerly views, and at least one blind wall. Construction costs are low; the average house is about $5500. There is partial central heating in all units which means warm kitchen and living rooms, cold bedrooms. The soil is not good, and, for the most part, lawns and grass have been avoided. Gardening is minimal except in the north east section where some rose fanciers have planted will against weather and won. The endless grey facades have been defended on the dreary grounds that they won't fade.



These detached houses are in a managerial quarter.

Within the areas which are called neighborhoods even if they are not supposed to be so, there is uniformity rather than variety of housing style. The low, blank walled arrangements, around walkways and tiny paved courtyards are pseudo-Moorish, Scots casbah. If, in a level stretch, a stranger loses sight of the Town Center on the hill, getting lost in the maze is a matter of time and luck. Considering the power and size of the Town Center, it is surprisingly difficult to maintain a sense of direction. If it is foggy and you can't possibly see IT, you can't see traffic, and you can't find a path going up or down, you are forced to search out the smallest details as clues to the way out. Possibly as a result of finding myself in that situation on my first visit, the single detail I like best about Cumbernauld is the use of cobbles, or granite setts. And, if I noticed them on my first visit, I paid particular attention to them the second time. In between I was in Edinburgh.

Late in July three students in Edinburgh, two planners and an architect, designed and prepared an exhibition about a very special kind of "urban conservation." It was called "The Floor of the City - S.O.S." Primarily at the behest of the bus drivers' association, the Edinburgh Corporation (city government) had, six months earlier, systematically begun to cover with asphalt the granite setts that pave the historic Royal Mile. Armed with the necessary, catchy, acronymic slogan, "S.O.S." - "Save Our Setts", the three decided to do something about the aesthetic travesty. They had the cooperation of the Pedestrians Association, the private Scottish Civic Trust, and the Saltire Society which lent the attic of its headquarters in the distinguished building called Gladstone's Land which is near the top of the Royal Mile. There was a soft whimper of publicity, including a sprinkle of posters.

The simple exhibition, mostly photographs and a few maps, had two main points, one general and aesthetic, the other specifically focused on the Royal Mile. The general notion of an urban room, in which the street is the floor, was persuasively illustrated and extended to show that streets can contain pattern, rhythm, texture and design which can be instructive and directive as well as attractive. The second part of the exhibit - SOS - was a collection of specific, but not necessarily related, arguments for the cause at hand, or, rather, at foot. The first was the obvious aesthetic rapport of the original buildings to their street pavings. The case was also made for keeping the sett surface as a visual link to the historical quality of street life in Edinburgh. For good political measure there was a practical argument as well. The bus drivers claimed, truthfully, that when wet, as in the wintertime, the smooth setts were a slippery dangerous driving surface. The students pointed out that good granite setts can, and should, be mechanically scratched, re-roughened, and, once that operation is finished, the setts last better than asphalt, don't ooze in the summer, and require little maintainance.

The exhibit concluded with a map of the Royal Mile showing the condition of the paving of each and every block with loving notation of unusual coloration, patterns and designs in the setts, wear, tear and ugliness of the asphalt where already applied, and, as a bonus for the observant walker, a delightful reference guide to unusual pot hole covers along the way.

The cobbles of Cumbernauld were retrieved from Glasgow as re-surfacing proceeded there apace. They have been used throughout with great care and skill. The footpaths are mostly cobbled. The courtyards, patios and small children's play areas are imaginatively patterned with setts which makes them seem not only larger but permanent as well. When wet they are relatively un-skiddy underfoot, and, as they glisten, somehow lighten drab space.

The overall architectural effect of Cumbernauld is interesting, unusual and imaginative. As to whether it evolved from, or really reflects, a thoughtful assesment of present, let alone future, family needs, I have a number of doubts.

To begin with a silly but annoying difficulty, families living on the north side of the mountain have discovered the mountaineers' complaint. Their television reception is miserable. People living on the south slope are unsympathetic to talk of a town wide, expensive, cable system because they don't need it. Naturally it was not an anticipated item, and to install it in only half the town will make it even more costly on a per-family basis.

The Town Center of Cumbernauld is, in theory and advertising brochures, no more than a twenty minute, or one mile, walk from any house. Indeed it is, ... for a man carrying no more than an umbrella. But, in Scotland the men take the cars to work and abandon the women to the daily chores, even in a town designed for the Motor Age. While the roadway system is complete, and there are bus stop shelters here and there on the loop roads, public transportation does not function properly, frequently or predictably. So, even if, as the public relations staff quickly remind anyone who asks, even if it is down hill all the way home from the Town Center, you have to get there first. And it is uphill all the way. For a young woman, pushing a pram, leading one or more small children, balancing an umbrella and, perhaps, packages, there are no unnecessary trips made to test the advertised walking time.

Does the centralization of commercial facilities catalyze community spirit by bringing people from all sections of the town into immediate contact in the course of daily activity? I was walking in a section on the north west side of Cumbernauld (the steeper side) when I heard a tremendous bleat, like the sound of the noon whistle in small town America. As I turned a corner into a small parking lot, I saw a twitter of women, in pin curls and carrying or dragging children, rush through the rain into a large bakery van. Inside, the van was equipped like a canteen or chuck wagon. It stocked not only bread, pies, and pastery, but soup, canned goods, cigarettes, candy, tea, soft drinks and a small assortment of other supplies one might ordinarily run to the corner to purchase.

A golden rule of community planning is to provide minimal recreational as well as commercial facilities as soon as possible to help new arrivals settle in, make friends and ignore the difficulties of construction. In the name of design, albeit extraordinary design, they have been postponed in Cumbernauld, with one exception. Play areas for small children, the group which in a new town's infancy dominates, have been designed to the most imaginative "creative plaything" standards. Older children, teen agers and adults have schools, church, and now, pubs. Entertainment, bargains, organized recreation is in Glasgow, a half hour away. In a town ostensibly so concerned with civic spirit, it would seem important to provide immediate alternatives for recreation.

The optimistic way of looking at any new town is as an experiment with a long list of variable components. Take a good look, then stand back to watch how the components are altered by time, use, and popular residential reaction.

Sincerely,

Eden Ross Lipson

When, as, and if, the fog lifts the views forgive almost all ... except, perhaps, the prevailing wind.

Received in New York November 20, 1967.