

4

THE SUBURBAN FLOP

- Best of Both Worlds
- Failure as Nature
- Pseudo Country
- Failure as City
- Complex and Invisible
- Travesty of Progress
- Dissolving Suburbs
- Urban No Man's Land

The art of building cannot be more grand than it is useful; nor its dignity a greater praise than its convenience.

Isaac Ware

A Complete Study of Architecture
1756

When I was a boy, my family was living in a city apartment with open gas-jets, individual coal-heated stoves in each room, including the bathroom, where warm water was heated for the bath each Saturday: that took two hours.

There was no electric streetcar, no automobile, of course, no plane.

Radio, film, gramophone, X-ray, telephone were nonexistent.

Walter Gropius

Design and Industry, 1950

The Binneys were among the first New York City dwellers to move to Old Greenwich, a decision that prompted members of their family to think "we were a pair of lunatics," Mrs. Binney said.

Mrs. Edwin Binney Dies:

Led Suburbia Migration
New York Herald Tribune, 1960

I'm moving back to New York, and I can't wait. Those fierce canyons hold no terrors for me: I've known the battlefield of Suburbia, and I'm not going to reenlist.

Mary McLaughlin

Good-by Suburbs, *Today's Living*
New York Herald Tribune, 1958

THE SUBURBAN FLOP

Best of Both Worlds

Nature is vanishing. The city is vanishing. The accelerating dissolution of both ideal nature and ideal city has induced a massive compromise, an attempt to salvage elements of both. In the early stages of the industrial revolution the urban magnet attracted country people into towns with the promise of jobs, variety and excitement, creating an inward flow. The reverse outward flow of disillusioned city dwellers escaping from congestion, degradation, and squalor, and in search of a privately owned "house in the country," has been going on ever since transportation made it possible. At first the privilege of the few, it has now become the compulsion of the many. The suburb, camp follower of technocratic culture, is spreading from the United States to the most distant corners of the earth with its myth of providing in a single package the convenience of the town house and the enjoyments of the country house. But both the pseudo city and the pseudo country, with commuters shuttling between them in a desperate search for satisfaction which neither can provide, appear in the end to promote little more than discontent. The suburb's promise of country life within easy reach of the pleasures of the city has proved false.

Nevertheless, for the present, the suburban environment seems likely to survive and expand; the wish to have one's cake and eat it is still strong. The desire to opt for the best of both possible worlds propounded by Ebenezer Howard, author of *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, in the late nineteenth century still seems to find favor in the middle twentieth; but the perversion of his excellent principles continues.

Failure as Nature

Howard's original amalgam of "Town-Country" was intended to provide urban man with a set of very excellent conditions, a constant relationship with the natural world. Few would contest the basic goal. In a physical environment "fit for man to live in," in the fullest sense, humanity must be able to see, touch, smell, and hear other forms of life. The real pleasure of the earth, the weather, the scent of plants, and the songs of birds and insects, cannot be enjoyed except through unhurried contact. Human lives, and especially the life processes of families, are stimulated by the visible order of nature. To appreciate these other kinds of life, and to enjoy them fully, it is essential that the contact with them be continual. Occasional escapes into the wilderness, stimulating though they may be, are not the same. The little tree growing outside one's own room is a more real tree than the largest Sequoia in the national park. One becomes conscious of one's own development only against the pulse of the changing seasons and the recurrent rhythms of light and dark. All this demands dwellings close to the ground with easy access to outdoors, an organic whole in which indoors and outdoors are integrated in a single comprehensive shelter.

Pseudo Country

The suburban house not only fails in the many details of organization that we will discuss more fully later, but even fails to provide this outdoor life successfully. The pseudo country house sits uneasily in its shrunken countryside, neither quite cheek by jowl with its neighbor nor decently remote, its flanks unprotected from prying eyes and penetrating sounds. It is a ridiculous anachronism.

The view from the picture window is of the other man's picture window. The individually owned and independently maintained outdoor spaces lap around the house and dribble miserably over curb edges into the gutters of

the street. The bare unused islands of grass serve only the myth of independence. This unordered space is neither town nor country; behind its romantic façade, suburbia contains neither the natural order of a great estate nor the man-made order of the historic city. What nature there is, neatly trimmed, standardized, bush by bush, flower by flower, is never free from its noisy, unnatural mechanical confinement. The richness of the best lawn or of the most prolific flowering hybrids pales before the splendor of the chrome-dazzling car. The finest young tree (young by necessity because the bulldozer takes precedence) is dwarfed by the full grown telegraph poles and the lianas of power lines.

Failure as City

The suburb fails to be a countryside because it is too dense. It fails to be a city because it is not dense enough, or organized enough. Countless scattered houses dropped like stones on neat rows of development lots do not create an order, or generate community. Neighbor remains stranger and the real friends are most often quite far away, as are schools, shopping and other facilities. The husband suffers the necessity of long-distance commuting, but the housewife who remains behind suffers the far greater pain of boredom. The housewife, or mother, for whom the suburb was intended, has become its greatest victim. Isolation in the vast sprawl of suburbia has led to a spiraling dependence on transportation and communication to provide contacts and experiences missing at home. The "little woman" finds herself either behind the wheel of a car, an unpaid chauffeur, or in front of the television set, a captive spectator.

Civilized man lives in a strange topsy-turvy world. People and places previously remote are now becoming part and parcel of an extended community whose effects

on the dwelling were not foreseen when the suburban process began. Modern communications systems bring, however fragmented and fleetingly, glimpses of phenomena and sounds never before seen or heard. Man is in touch with the whole world without moving from his seat. But the man next door with different tastes, often expressed in diverse and loud noises, is all at once transformed from desirable neighbor into intrusive stranger. The suburb pays no attention to these closely linked overwhelming changes, and pretends to be a village of closely knit neighbors and friends. The men, women, and children of suburbia are seldom quite together, and never quite alone.

Complex and Invisible

The suburb aggravates its failure by refusing to relate to its technology. In a technically advanced society, neither town nor dwelling is any longer a self-contained unit. Its most vital and indispensable components are those that connect it to the larger environment and are hardly visible. Radio waves are totally invisible. Water, sewage, and power lines are for the most part hidden. Roadways, telephone poles, and spilling garbage cans, though ever present, are not seen by us because we have learned to overlook them.

The industrial society spends more and more of its house-dollar not on the visible spatial structure, on the buildings that are "Architecture" in its traditional sense, but on items of connection, circulation, communication, comfort, hygiene, all involving mechanical and electrical equipment. The dwelling has become essentially a cell in a complex organism—and must be seen as such if it is to correspond to either old or new realities. If man's habitat is not to become a malignant cancer it must be given a form reflecting its new function.

Travesty of Progress

It is because the industrial, commercial, and professional purveyors of housing shun responsibility for the larger organism and continue to provide nothing more than pseudo autonomous creations that our lives are so far out of joint. *A form that ignores its technical context cannot possibly accommodate the good life successfully.* Indeed, it is precisely because the significant advances of technology have been ignored that the good life is slipping through our fingers. Sophisticated, "up-to-date" techniques or new materials do not automatically improve performance. Synthetics and machinery obviously have their special qualities and proper place. But our ability to manufacture a plastic container the size of a house and then fill it with mechanical gadgets hardly commends itself as progress in housing if the plan serves obsolete purposes.

Dissolving Suburbs

Growing disillusionment with suburbia, with its debilitating sameness, with the wastefulness of commuting for those who are forced to spend at least a part of their life in cities, has led quite recently to the beginnings of a return to the city. In spite of growing decentralization, and the fact that more and more people with more and more cars live in the never-never land of Suburbia, most of the money continues to be earned and spent in the city proper. The affluent society is under constant pressure to buy something new, and the suburban shopping-center parking lot (and movie theater) is too limited in its range of choice to satisfy expanding appetites. In many cities retail centers (and recreation centers) through ambitious urban renewal programs are beginning to exploit their advantage. But while helping to revitalize the city, these centers still aggravate the overload of shuttling traffic. For a long time to come, one car out of the two in every

ideal garage will, no doubt, continue to be a little private pig going to the central public market.

People want to be everywhere. The reason they moved out was to find the country and escape the disadvantages of the city. The reason they are moving back is that the country is no longer there and they would like to regain the advantages of the city. But when everything is everywhere, wherever you go there is nothing tangible to find.

Urban No Man's Land

Searching for a better amalgam of the man-made and the natural than suburbia provides, urban designers have now begun to replace the suburban no man's land with an urban no man's land. They have created low and high rise apartment blocks, free standing in their own "green" space, to create, through contrast, the illusion of country. Though the logic of this device seemed admirable at first, the enjoyment of such scattered green spaces has turned out to be largely illusory. They are not large enough to act as public parks, and not small enough to possess the intimate pleasure of the private garden. Everything belongs to everybody with the result that nothing actually belongs to, or is enjoyed by, anybody. Their ownership, administration, and maintenance is neither specifically public nor private. They are the leftover voids between gigantic boxes, where sparsely sprinkled adults and children are equally ill at ease. More often than not, even the plans that profess to have found the ideal solution squander available land by allocating it to questionable purposes, or more often still, to no real purposes at all.

The time may soon come when planners, designers, developers, and others will recognize and act on the simple notion that the spaces between buildings are as important to the life of urban man as the buildings themselves.

If the total land area were to be carefully planned for maximum use at every scale, the inner city could accommodate both vertical buildings for all-purpose use and short-term occupancy, and dwellings on the ground for families with children. Such dwellings on the ground could, as functioning parts of the urban technological context, succeed where suburbia has failed.

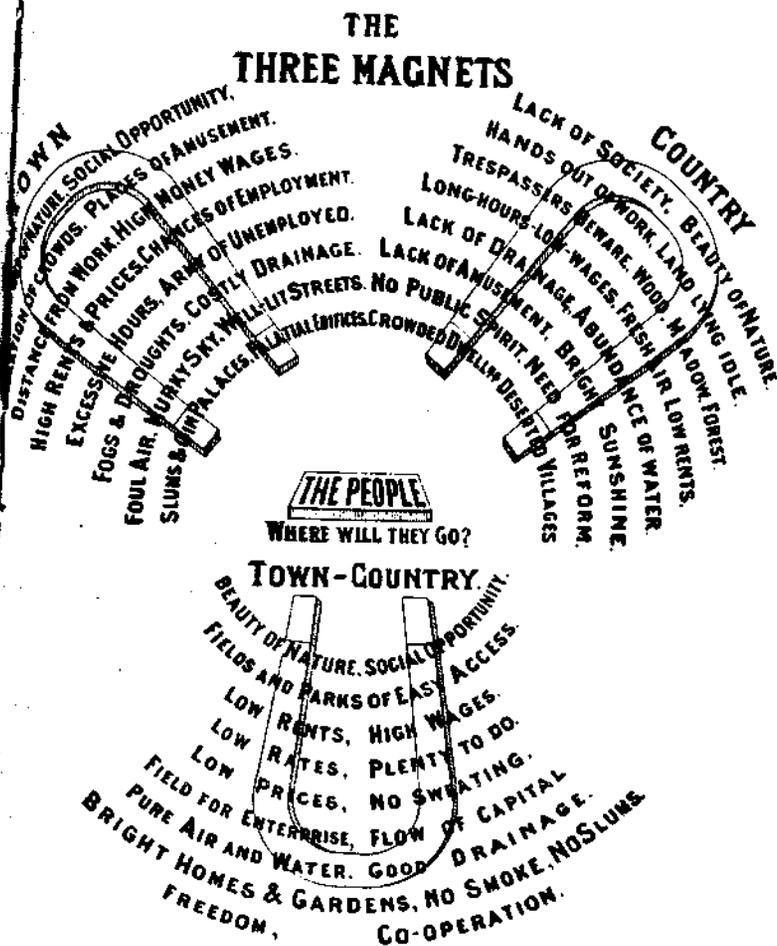


Diagram by Ebenezer Howard

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He has been in architectural practice in England, California, New York, and Boston, and in addition to planning and designing public and private buildings has designed furnishings, special interiors, and fixtures, and has been essayist, lecturer, and critic in England and the United States. He is a fellow of both the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Royal Society of Arts.

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Serge Chermayeff Christopher Alexander

Toward a New Architecture of Humanism

COMMUNITY AND PRIVACY

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