THE IMPROVEMENT OF TOWNS: BY RAYMOND UNWIN

ARISTOTLE defined a city as "a place where men live a common life for a noble end." To study the life and growth of the great cities of the past, is to realize how much the aesthetic or architectural greatness of a city depends on the common life and the noble end; and how truly the city becomes an expression of these.

Fine city building is indeed an art; one of the greatest of the arts; for it is not the work of an individual, but an art practised by the citizens as a body. In the making of a fine poem there must be something fine to say, and it must be finely said; before the artist can produce a great picture he must have something great to reveal, and must have the skill to reveal it in a great manner. Equally is it true that for fine city building there must be something great in the ideals and aims to express, and a common life strong enough to give it a great expression. Individuals may provide the technical skill, but the citizens as a body must provide alike the inspiring ideal, and the enthusiasm and power of execution. In all consideration of the improvement and beautifying of towns this thought must be borne in mind. Unpractical as it may sound to some, it will be found to afford not only the truest safeguard against the extravagant schemes of individual fancy, or the aimless attempts to achieve grandeur which spring from false civic pride, but also the surest guide as to what we should do to beautify our towns.

If civic art is the expression of the life and ideals of the citizens, we may define the duty of the civic artist as "the well doing of what needs doing"—surely a very clear and practical guide. Does the town need a market? Build that market hall a fine commodious one, that the goods may be well seen and the marketing may be done with comfort and dignity; supply the actual need generously and well. So shall we add more beauty to our town than by erecting a cheap shed for the market, and adding a fountain to our square. By all means let us have the fountain and many another beautiful luxury in due time, but not while so many of our people lack homes, or, having homes, lack all decent surroundings to them. The muse of Civic Art does not to-day ask us to propound great schemes for making our towns grand and beautiful, and when any such schemes are sug-
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gested she looks upon them with suspicion, and is apt to say to the ambitious Council: "Nay, offer me not this bauble; instead, go back, add twenty feet to yon mean street you are making, and plant it with trees!" Forgive me for emphasizing this point; for unless I can convince you of the thoroughly practical character of Civic Art, I shall have little chance of persuading you, as I hope to do, that the greatest and most urgent improvement required in our towns is the introduction of Civic Art; the introduction into all that we do of that small margin of generosity and imaginative treatment which constitutes it well done. It is useless to rely on mere bye-laws as to streets and buildings; there are in our great cities square miles laid out under stringent bye-laws—the most dreary, depressing, and hopelessly ugly areas upon the face of the earth. They have lacked one thing, the touch of Civic Art, that margin which would have constituted the well doing. With that margin how different they might have been! Finely has Professor Geddes said of this Art that "It is the noblest of luxuries and most enduring of economies." We spend our thousand pounds on some improvement, and for lack of that small margin which would have made it into guineas we lose at least half the value we might have had. Is there economy here? We lay out a new street, and for lack of thought and imagination enough to alter its direction a few degrees we shut out some view of Cathedral spire, of distant hill, of trees, water, or what not, which might have afforded an interesting vista, a daily and hourly pleasure for generation after generation of dwellers in the streets and passers to and fro. How readily we spend on some trivial bauble a sum which would have transformed our new street into an avenue, growing in beauty year by year. Our fathers planted a few such avenues, and we love to walk down them, but how little we dream that every town might have a dozen such. It would be easy to arrange that every new street should have some special character and charm of its own, and instead of the dreary daily walks to and from work which are the common lot now, to provide both interest and pleasure in the greatest variety. The Japanese have special holidays to celebrate the flowering time of certain trees; and even the English workman might be tempted to vary his route home, if in one street he could find the earliest blossoming trees, in another the first spring green, and in a third the last bright colour of autumn.
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It would be outside the scope of this paper to discuss the proposal made by Mr. Howard, that the pressure of population in our large towns should be relieved by the building of Garden Cities near to them, with a few miles of agricultural land intervening. But the splendid opportunity such a scheme affords for the orderly arrangement and beautiful development of a town, renders the experiment now being tried at Letchworth, near Hitchin, by the First Garden City Company, of special importance to all who are interested in town improvement. Many of us build castles in the air; some few see them take material form but to few does the opportunity occur, first to build a city in the air, and then see it take form upon the ground. It is difficult to say whether the experiment is more instructive because of the possibilities of improvement it suggests, or because of the limitations it reveals. Such an opportunity cannot fail to set one's mind dreaming of parks and palaces, fountains and avenues; but when one comes to the actual work, it is soon evident that the utmost one can do is to do well just what must be done. It seems a simple matter enough to arrange for houses to be set far back in their gardens, but it is wonderful how the extra cost of drains, and gas and water pipes, begins to mount up. Where land is inexpensive, one would not expect to find difficulty in arranging for wide grass margins and other such simple delights. But people are not accustomed to the common enjoyment of such margins: they look suspiciously on even the very small cost of them, and wish to enclose them in their own gardens.

In helping to give material form to the Garden City idea, I have realized how closely Civic Art must confine itself to the well doing of what needs doing. But once this limitation is accepted, the opportunity becomes indeed great. When we set aside our dreams of grandeur, and begin to make the best of the land at our disposal, we realize scope enough and to spare. First the main lines of traffic must be thought out, and direct routes laid down from point to point. The Railway Station has to be fixed: here is one of our most important traffic centres, it must be possible to reach this from every point by roads of easy gradients. The Municipal centre must be determined near to the station, but clear of its noise and bustle. An Educational centre, recreation grounds, processional ways, all must be thought of. In this land of prevailing west wind, naturally one tries
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to arrange the factory area, to the east of the town, but it must be easily accessible alike from town and railway. The scheme grows as the various needs are considered and met, and all the while there are spots of natural beauty to be preserved, trees to be guarded from destruction, views of the country to be kept open from all parts of the town, and views of the fine buildings we hope some day to possess to be arranged from various parts, steep places to be avoided, points where the railway can easily be bridged to be seized upon, and main roads induced to cross there; and, moreover, the cost of roads to be carefully kept in mind, and a due relation maintained between this and the building areas opened up. But while the problem seems to become more and more hopelessly complicated, it is really solving itself, for every fresh need is a new formative agency, and the designer’s chief business is to determine and keep clearly before him the right proportional importance of each need, and to give it due expression. In detail, very much may be done to express and encourage some of the newer aspirations that are spreading in our time, such, for example, as the desire for more open-air life, or the reviving sense of the importance of towns as centres of culture and schools of thought. Many of our large towns have already acquired considerable areas, and have laid them out as parks, but they are mostly destitute of the small green spots which should be provided in abundance. If one has half-an-hour to wait at a station, or wishes to have an interview with anyone while passing through some town, one can rarely find a quiet corner with a seat, but mostly has to tramp the busy streets, sit in the noisy station, or pay for a corner by taking a needless drink or meal. Unless a town is laid out strictly on the checkerboard system, small spaces not suitable for buildings are constantly provided at the junctions of streets, where small gardens, greens, or, at least, paved recesses for seats, could be contrived. In the treatment of the streets themselves, the diverse conditions suggest a variety which, if adopted, would add much to the charm of a town. Some streets should be kept free of trees to preserve an open view: these may be beautified by grass margins, shrubs, or forecourt gardens; in others, low trees will not injure the view; in others again, where there is no view, the avenue of street trees may be made the feature of chief interest. The small amount of land needed for such simple street decoration, will contribute vastly more to the
health and pleasure of life than the addition of the few yards it would represent if added to each back yard or garden could possibly do. It will be found generally the truest economy from the point of view of the effect produced, to unite open spaces instead of distributing them; the six to ten feet gaps so common between small villas are of little service, but if the villas were united into groups of four or six, and a gap of some thirty feet then left between the groups, this would be a pleasing break, and might afford a view of garden, country, or building beyond, that would add distinct interest to the street.

The arrangement and placing of the houses and buildings must be affected by the growing importance attached to sunlight and pleasant surroundings, which are coming to be regarded as hardly less necessary than a sufficiency of air space if a healthy life is to be enjoyed. Monotonous rows of houses, or the hardly less monotonous pairs, with their little back yards, cannot any longer be considered as satisfactory. Instead, groups of houses should be planned, so arranged as to get sunny aspects, and to have something pleasant to look upon both front and back. Gaps between the groups should be arranged as far as possible where there is something pleasant to be seen through them, and houses placed opposite gaps to benefit by the view. Houses, too, may be arranged on two or three sides of small greens, or gardens, in quadrangles, or in various ways, to secure variety and interest in their surroundings. For many of these improvements nothing at all is needed but that someone should think of them and suggest them at the right time.

This brings me to the question of how far it is possible to do in existing towns what is being attempted in the Garden City. I think the first step should be to make it the duty of someone to consider and report upon all proposed town improvements, new streets, buildings, etc., from the point of view of Civic Art; and such reports should be made public. It is quite certain that at first, in many instances, the recommendations of such an one would be set aside in favour of engineering or economical considerations, but there would be many occasions when no reason could be found for disregarding the advice, and it would then be followed; and at the least it would be an immense gain to have secured that this point of view should be brought up for consideration in each case, and an opportunity pro-
vided for the formation of public opinion on this aspect of Civic work. A voluntary committee in the first instance could do much good by exercising the critical functions of such an official, and by bringing home to the public the importance of such an appointment. There is springing up a considerable literature on this subject in America and in Germany. In the latter country an admirable monthly periodical, Der Städtebau, wholly devoted to town improvement and beautifying, was started this year. Such a committee as I suggest, by keeping in touch with this literature, would become a most valuable centre of information and interest on the subject.

Many complaints have been made recently about the working of our building bye-laws in country districts, but in towns also these regulations are far from satisfactory, and an attempt should at once be made to secure greater elasticity in them. This may be done by having different sets of bye-laws for different parts of the town. It is obviously absurd, that in the suburban districts where land is only worth a few hundred pounds per acre, we should not be able to secure greater open space and more rural character of streets than in the busiest parts of the centre where land is sold by the yard; and it is equally absurd that we must prescribe the same regulations as to stability and security from fire in the gentleman’s detached villa and the workman’s cottage as in the crowded business premises of the main streets. In Germany, where the improvement of towns has been very scientifically taken in hand during the last ten years, the practice now is to divide the town into districts or zones, and to prescribe varying regulations in each zone. By this means not only are the regulations made more elastic, but they can be more complete: regulations for a business area not needing to be hampered by their applicability to a cottage or villa district, or vice versa. But in addition to this, the regulations may be made much more elastic by limiting their application, and expressly allowing exceptions. These exceptions may be so made as to encourage the features that one wishes to see. For example, in many towns the minimum width allowed for any street is 42 feet, which must all be macadamised and paved, and this regulation applies equally to all roads, whatever purpose they are likely to serve. I have seen such a road laid down to serve a dozen cottages in the centre of a country field, in a position where it would never by any possibility be used for any traffic except that of the milk
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cart and coal wagon on their occasional rounds. Why should it not be allowed in such a case to reduce the actual roadway and footway to a width reasonably proportionate to the traffic, on condition that the remaining space should be planted with trees or shrubs, or laid down as grass margins in front of the houses?

It is also essential that our municipal authorities should have more power to control the development of their towns, to prescribe the arrangement of new streets, and in every way provide in advance for the needs of growing districts. This is a case in which we entirely ignore the predominance of the communal interest, and think exclusively of the interest of the individual landowner. Here, again, the German system is much better. The Municipal Authorities are not only empowered but are instructed to prepare building plans in advance for all growing districts, to arrange the streets in the most convenient, beautiful, and economical way, to define the height of buildings, fix the building lines and areas, and even to determine the class of building, forbidding, for example, blocks of dwellings except where large open spaces are adjacent, and excluding all offensive factories or trades from residential districts. Increased powers to purchase and hold land around the town should also be obtained for our municipalities, so that adequate open spaces may be secured at reasonable cost to the town, and more generous provision generally made for the public needs of growing districts.

So long as we leave individual landowners to develop their own plots of land in their own way, our towns must continue to grow in their present haphazard manner. But if their development is arranged and regulated by some central authority, it becomes at once easy to consider the possibilities of the site, to preserve features of beauty and interest, to keep open distant views, and to arrange the roads with proper regard for convenience and beauty.

With the additional powers suggested above, all towns could secure for their new suburbs many of the advantages of arrangement which the ownership of the whole of the land has made it possible for the Garden City Company to secure on their estate. The town would, in fact, have secured freedom to express its life adequately. It could provide for open-air life, by arranging plenty of small open spaces, recreation grounds and play places for children, with sand
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heaps, paddling ponds, and other simple delights, which would make the life of the town child a new thing.

We must realize that it is almost as important to make our new areas attractive as to make them healthy. It is the attractiveness alone that will tempt the slum dweller to move out of the town and benefit by the healthiness of the suburb. There is a certain picturesque and excitement about the slum life near the busy centre of the town, and it is essential to offer some more wholesome counter attraction if we are to draw the people into healthier districts. In nothing is it so true as in housing reform, that it is the well doing which matters. It is that which is provided over and above the bare house and street which really counts. It is just the little margin of imaginative treatment which transforms our work from the building of clean stables for animals into the building of homes for human beings, which is of value; for it is just this which appeals to and influences the inner heart of the man. This margin Civic Art can add to our town development, and hence I urge its importance.
CHANDELIER AND DETAIL OF ROSE GARLAND ON CHANDELIER, BY M. ALEXANDRE