MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW

The Architecture of Servitude and Boredom

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THE BRITISH urban riots of last July came to Edinburgh somewhat tardily, but they came. I asked a knowledgeable Scottish engineer, who builds roads but is an architect too, what had caused the Edinburgh troubles.

"Bad architecture," he told me. He meant that the Edinburgh riot arose in one of the ugliest and most boring of the county-council public housing schemes, afflicted by a ghastly monotony. He did not suggest that the rioters were endowed with good architectural taste: it was rather that the people who dwell in that Edinburgh housing-scheme are perpetually discontented, without quite knowing why—and spoiling for a fight.

It would not be difficult, I think, to show that the dreariness of life in the working class quarters of English and Scottish towns was a principal cause of the burning and the looting and the stoning of police that came to pass in Liverpool and London and other places. It was not that the districts where the riots occurred were architectural survivals from the Bleak Age: no, those quarters were built or rebuilt after the Second World War. But everything in them, including the police stations, was shoddy and badly designed. It has been said that mankind can endure anything but boredom. With great buildings or with small, the architecture of our mass-age, in this latter half of the twentieth century, has been wondrously boring. Also it has been an architecture of sham: the outward symbol of a society which, despite all its protestations of being "free" and "democratic," rapidly sinks into servility.

What Sir Osbert Sitwell has called "the modern proletarian cosmopolis" has been sliding, politically and architecturally, toward general servitude and general boredom. Talking vaguely of egalitarianism and an international style, the "renewers" of our cities have been creating long vistas of boredom. Amidst this boredom, the natives are restless. With every month that passes, the rate of serious crimes increases. And what is done to alleviate such discontents? Why, not infrequently the public authorities are moved to relieve the barrenness of their urban landscapes by commissioning somebody to design (for a delightful fee) another piece of junk sculpture, the product of the

blowtorch, to be erected in some place of public assembly. Federal funds have been made available to encourage such junk-sculpture frauds. Yet somehow these contributions to a city's amenities do not restore civic virtue: the rates of murder, rape, and arson continue to rise.

Twenty years ago, when Jane Jacobs published her detailed and convincing study *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, I naively assumed that the tide had turned; that our hideous blunders in urban planning (or lack of planning) were repented by the makers of public policy and the leaders of business and industry; that we might discern the beginnings of a recovery of the humane scale in our urban life and conceivably in our architecture. Seventeen years ago, when I addressed at St. Louis (then the most decayed city in America) the National Conference of the American Institute of Planners, I fancied that I discerned among some urban planners glimmerings of sense and taste. But I was ludicrously mistaken.

For the policies of the Johnson administration, in the name of urban "renewal," created urban deserts and jungles on a scale previously unparalleled in time of peace. George Romney, in his last address as governor of Michigan, declared that the great Detroit riots had been provoked by "urban renewal and federal highway building." He was accurate; and nobody paid any attention.

Dr. Martin Anderson's book *The Federal Bulldozer* described the Johnsonian folly, and suggested remedies; but only some minor checks upon the process were effected. We continued to dehumanize our cities; if the pace of destruction is somewhat slowed nowadays, that is chiefly for lack of funds. Quite literally, as T.S. Eliot observed concerning education in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, we are "destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans."

Indulge me in an illustration. Nowadays I have an office in the handsome old Rockefeller Building, Louis Sullivan's work, in downtown Cleveland. When in that city, I stay usually at a Holiday Inn near the lake; and of an evening, sometimes I sit beside Cardinal Mindszenty to survey Cleveland's moribund downtown. The Cardinal is a bronze bust, erected by Clevelanders of Hungarian descent in a recently-contrived little plaza named after that heroic churchman; I seem to be the only person who ever seats himself upon the recessed bench by the Cardinal's head, in the shadow of the towering Holiday Inn.

On my right, along a broad avenue that is ghostly after business hours, stand a series of splendid public buildings: Cleveland has spared such architectural monuments, which is more than can be said of many cities. Despite the abuse frequently heaped upon Cleveland (even by the mayor of Boston!), Cleveland's core remains less damaged than most, in part because of the Rapid Transit system that runs along old railway lines. Nevertheless, Cardinal Mindszenty and I, sitting cheek by jowl, do not enjoy a cheerful prospect.

A few hundred yards in front of us, St. John's College, the last handsome stone complex to be erected in Cleveland, has been pulled down to make way for an insurance company's skyscraper, now being erected. (It is one of the mysteries of urban America today that despite a glut of office-space downtown, brand-new office towers continue to shoot up mushroom-like, often with public subsidies involved.) St. John's Cathedral is being hidden from view by very tall featureless glass-and-steel office buildings.

Off to our left, the Cleveland skyline is dominated by row upon row of really grim high-rise apartment houses, also heavily subsidized, in which dwells what remains of human population downtown. Scarcely any of these cliffdwellers are to be encountered on the street after six o'clock: they are a timid race generally, adjusting themselves to an age of servility, in which everybody talks abstractly of "human rights" but does not presume to walk abroad except at approved hours.

Between Cardinal Mindszenty Plaza and

these topless towers of Ilium, and between the high-rises and the lake, stretches an abomination of desolation: half-derelict warehouses and failing little industrial enterprises, scattered across many blocks of demolition and cut-rate parking lots, with here or there a boarded-up Italianate house or shop of a century gone. One must walk nearly a mile through this no-man's-land, back of the *Plain Dealer* plant, to encounter human beings afoot—those being elderly Chinese in the vicinity of the half-dozen eating houses and shops that constitute the remnant of Cleveland's Chinatown.

Such is the prospect before the unseeing (fortunately) eyes of Cardinal Mindszenty, who surveys Cleveland like Wilde's Happy Prince. I have not been describing Cleveland's slums, which are nastier and more perilous than this inner-city wasteland. I have been warned repeatedly not to leave my hotel at night; but I wander these mean streets nocturnally nevertheless, for hours on end. Never have I been seriously menaced, doubtless because muggers do not frequent regions where no prey survive. Downtown Cleveland is sufficiently ghostly after business hours, even most of the hotels having been swept away.

The process sweeps on. The last functioning downtown movie house, the vast Hippodrome Theater, has been pulled down, against public protest, by a local judge who plans another office building on the site; it was difficult to find a Cleveland lawyer bold enough to take the case of the preservationists. One of the big oil companies, leagued with the demagogue who dominates the city council, is intent upon demolishing—right on Public Square, the city's centerpiece—the Cuyahoga Building (restored handsomely only three years ago) and other fine old neighboring buildings, to make way for yet another office tower. Such economic follies are justified by the argument that "they bring jobs to Cleveland." Certainly great fortunes are made for certain developers and builders and persons with good political connections, in Cleveland and virtually every other American city, by this systematic annihilation of the civic and architectural past. Cardinal Mindszenty saw the Russian army ruin Budapest, and his image surveys the desolation of Cleveland by its own nominal leaders.

As I endeavored to remind the American Institute of Planners, seventeen years ago, successful planning must be concerned primarily with the person, and how he thrives under a plan; with the republic (or the public interest), and what sort of society arises from grand designs. I quote Eliot once more: "One thing to avoid is a universalized planning; one thing to ascertain is the limits of the plannable."

Assuming, however, that urban planning has no limits, the breed of urban planners have given us the architecture of servitude and boredom. Over the past quarter of a century and more, anarchy and desolation have been the consequences of grandiose pseudo-planning. One is a good deal safer in Palermo, or Tunis, or Fez, than in New York, or Chicago, or Los Angeles. For those ancient towns, whatever their difficulties and their poverty, remain genuine communities, in which the townsman still is a person, not wholly lost in the faceless crowd; and in which, whatever the degree of civic corruption, still the public authority can maintain a tolerable order. Our urban planners have lost those civic advantages.

Some years ago I received a letter from a young man in Oklahoma, conservatively inclined, who had dropped out of college because his university, like the American urban behemoth, possessed neither imagination nor humane apprehension. I offer you some of his observations on urban planning and architecture.

"First, the quality of the architecture," he wrote. "Organic architecture is being ignored, for the most part, because of its personal and individual quality. Planning for the individual must entail an individual architecture, not international style *à la* the current mode of Paul Rudolph, Louis I. Kahn, Gordon Bunshaft, and the Eastern boys.

"Second, the sheer size of our cities will kill human culture. You are acquainted with the Brave New Worlds that our latest periodicals display, such as Paulo Soleri's

'City on the Mesa.' Frightful, but it is coming; the mob loves it; togetherness.

"Third, the automobile is obsolete. It is time we recognized this before the auto makes civilization obsolete....The Highway Commissioner must be stopped or, better, overruled.

"Fourth, the land-speculators are the great makers of slumurbia, responsible for the concentration of skyscrapers. All too often they are defended as part of a free economy."

This young critic concluded, "It seems to me that we can plan the functional requirements of a city, but the more we plan the culture of cities, meaning especially the architecture of cities, the worse it will get. In other words, plan part of the city, and include as part of the plan a great deal that is unplanned."

Just so; this seeming paradox is what Eliot meant in his remarks on the limits of planning. In American society, urban planning has tended to reflect the talent of Americans for technological success, but also to reflect their frequent deficiency in the realm of imagination, remarked by Tocqueville a century and a half ago. So we find ourselves in our air-conditioned urban jungle.

So I venture to suggest just now some general principles of urban restoration which—in the dawning era of conservative renewal—might help to redeem this country from boredom and servitude.

First, the architecture of a city and a countryside ought to be adapted to the humane scale. A city is not simply a collectivity; it is a vital continuity, composed of a great many distinct individuals, most of whom have no desire to be precisely like everybody else. Society is not a machine: on the contrary, it is a kind of spiritual corporation; and if treated as a machine, people rebel, politically or personally.

Second, the community called a city must nurture roots, not hack through them. Neighborhoods, voluntary associations, old landmarks, historic monuments—such elements make men and women feel at home. They bind together a community with what Gabriel Marcel calls "diffused gratitude." Restoration and rehabilitation almost always are preferable to grand reconstitution—even when more expensive, which repair rarely is.

Third, the measure of urban planning should be not commercial gain primarily, but the common good. In miscalled "urban renewal," the Johnson administration's "war on poverty" actually was war against the poor, for the advantage of the speculator and the contractor. Once I spoke to an association of Jewish charities in a large meeting room at the top of Boston's museum of science. From the windows, we looked across the bay to a district covered by immense high-rise and high-rent apartments, or even more costly condominiums. Only three years earlier, I was told by the rabbi who chaired our meeting, this had been a low-rent district inhabited by poor Jews. The area had not been a slum, he said. Looking out the window, "Where are they now?" he murmured. "Why, dead, or swept under the rug." Those words would have been as true in a hundred other American cities.

Fourth, civic restoration must be founded upon the long-established customs, habits, and political institutions of a community. Most convictions and institutions are products of a long historical process of winnowing and filtering. No planner, however ingenious, can make humanity happy by being stretched upon a Procrustean bed of social innovation. And among the deepest longings of humankind is the desire for permanence and security of territory, "a place of one's own."

These four very general principles, generally disregarded by the typical planner of the twentieth century, slowly obtain a hearing once more. We may see them at work practically in the successful restoration, for instance, of an eighteenth-century city of high interest, Savannah. But these beneficent concepts have not yet entered the head of the run-of-the-mill city politician and urban administrator.

Consider Detroit, the city I used to know best. Nobody can take pleasure in knowing Detroit well nowadays. That city's publicists boast of the Renaissance Center,

a group of glittering colossal towers near the river, including a hotel, offices, and a shopping complex — the whole constructed very like a fortress, with redoubts, doubtless in anticipation of a storm by the nearby proletariat one of these days. From the restaurant at the summit of the Detroit Plaza Hotel, one can behold mile upon mile of decay and obliteration of a city founded at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Nearly all the old neighborhoods and districts of Detroit that I used to explore during my college days have been obliterated. Even the old high-domed City Hall has vanished without trace, supplanted by another blank-walled tower. The central block of the Wayne County Courthouse, with its quadriga and elaborate baroque decoration, still stands, overshadowed by the Renaissance Center; but those in Detroit's seats of the mighty wish to pull it down — another job for the wrecking contractors.

From the Renaissance Center, one may stroll in relative safety to the cafes of Greektown, less than a hundred yards distant. Beyond that little old quarter only the unwary venture: a glance at a map showing the incidence of violent crimes in Detroit will explain why. In fine, the boasted Renaissance Center, externally and internally a triumph of extravagantly bad taste, is a beleaguered island amidst the swamp of urban savagery. Certain persons, true, have been mightily enriched by this Detroit development, for which abundant federal funds were obtained. One wonders whether, twenty years from now, the Renaissance Center will not have been demolished in its turn.

A few miles north of the Renaissance Center — on a clear day, one can see the district with the naked eye from the top of the Detroit Plaza Hotel — there lay, until a few months ago, the old district of Poletown, inhabited by people of eastern European stock. That whole neighborhood has been pulled down, against the vehement protest of its inhabitants, to supply a site for a new General Motors plant. Thousands of people, many of them elderly, nearly all of them in narrow circumstances, were abruptly uprooted. Where have they gone? Some have doubled up in slums — though they were not slumfolk before. Others presumably are settled, or will be settled, in new low-income housing developments, commonly uglier and more dangerous than the older slums. Two Catholic churches have been demolished, despite the resistance of pastors and congregations.

This scandalous "clearance," widely and unfavorably publicized, was made possible by an unholy alliance among Coleman Young, Detroit's black mayor; General Motors planners, said to have been bullied by Mayor Young; and Cardinal Dearden, archbishop of Detroit (since retired), who was given to much talk about injustice toward the poor, and all that. When General Motors tardily offered to move one of Poletown's churches to a new site, Cardinal Dearden rejected the offer and insisted upon demolition — to the astonishment and rage of pastor and parishioners. It is all a rather nasty story, deserving of a small sardonic book. So Poletown is gone; and the decent people of small means who lived there have been shuffled off to the architecture of boredom and servitude. You may be sure they'll not spend their declining years in any Renaissance Center. Again, the power of eminent domain and plenty of public money were involved in this successful assault on community. Are people treated more arbitrarily, with greater disregard of their rights in property, in a socialist dictatorship?

After this fashion, even in these United States, there takes form the future collectivism, like one of H.G. Wells' utopias or Aldous Huxley's dystopia: the countryside almost totally depopulated; the great bulk of the population packed into smart, shoddy, comfortless, impersonal "housing developments"; and looming above this landscape and manscape, the blank-walled towers of the administrative class. The architecture of this future (or rather, emerging) domination retains nothing whatsoever that wakes the imagination or satisfies the memory. One may predict that in this domination of utilitarianism, life

will be unsafe increasingly, as well as unsatisfying; and that despite an outward appearance of material accomplishment, real incomes will diminish steadily: architectural impoverishment and general impoverishment are jointed historically. Jacquetta Hawkes' fable "The Unites" represents the final degradation of such a collectivism.

In that tale, Miss Hawkes (Mrs. J. B. Priestley) describes a future society from which all privacy, all art (except degraded vestiges), all beauty of architecture, and all symbols have been stripped away, together with all belief in the divine. Production and consumption — though reduced to bare subsistency levels — are the obsessions of the folk who call themselves the Unites. I quote a passage from this fable:

> Perhaps it was this utilitarianism more than anything else which made Unite existence fall so far below the worst of human life in former days. Peasants of old had lived from birth to death almost as helplessly, with almost as little hope of escape, but their life's course had been decked with fantasy and symbol, with simple art and ritual, with very many things that were of no use in daily life except to make it human and significant. Now utilitarianism itself was at its most base, for needs and expectations had been so much reduced that all were perfectly satisfied. To have no desire is far more dreadful than for desire to remain unfulfilled.

The population of our cities is not very far from that condition. When all interesting architecture has fallen into the limbo of lost things, presumably the rising generation will raise no objection to the architecture of servility and boredom, because they will know no alternative. Desire will have starved to death. As Jacquetta Hawkes implies, architecture, like all art and all science, arises originally out of the religious impulse; and when a culture's religious quest and yearning have expired, then architecture, like all the other aspects of a culture, falls into decadence. Thus the moral condition of our urban life and the dreariness of our architecture are not separate phenomena.

But I must permit some cheerfulness to break in, at this point. Here and there in this land, effective resistance is offered to the evangels of architectural boredom. A decade ago, it was proposed to sweep away the old streets of Galena, Illinois — one of our surviving historic towns with a good deal of interesting architecture — in order to build supermarkets and "modernize" generally. After a hard fight, in which I took some hand, the developers were defeated. Yet a similar scheme for modernizing the business streets of Charleston, South Carolina, "Charleston Center," again backed by large federal grants, apparently is about to change much of the character of the most charming old city in the United States. It was with great difficulty, a few years ago, that we beat back the scheme of highway builders and Charleston's mayor for virtually destroying much of Charleston as a good place to live by a grandiose system of new bridges and roads.

Yet say not the struggle naught availeth. Through years of protest and litigation, we did succeed in one major contest against utilitarian city planners, in a really big city: the defeat of the Riverfront Expressway at New Orleans, which would have blighted the French Quarter and done other mischief. You can read about that fight in a recent book by Richard Baumbach and William Borah, *The Second Battle of New Orleans* (University of Alabama Press). The advocates of preservation of our architectural patrimony do obtain some hearing today — after most of that patrimony has been flattened.

Preservation of good buildings, good streets, and good districts is only one aspect of our struggle against the architecture of servility and boredom. New construction, whether downtown or in the suburbs, looms larger. High costs of all building unite with the sorry limitations of most architects to produce barren public buildings, office towers, and "motor hotels"; while the condominiums and the tract-houses employ third-rate materials and

fourth-rate interior decoration. Ever since the Second World War, the old arts of building have lain in the sere and yellow leaf. Facile apologies for shoddy and dreary work arc offered—as, in Waugh's novel *Helena,* the architects and sculptors of the Emperor Constantine offer him excuses for not building a triumphal arch in the old grand style: "That is not the function of the feature, sire," and similar jargon. At length Constantine demands of them, "Can you do it?" And those architects are compelled to answer, "No." So it is in our age: a principal reason why our buildings are ugly is that our architects and craftsmen have quite forgotten how to construct handsome buildings. Incidentally, I commend to everyone interested in the relationships between social decay and the decline of architecture and the arts a slim book published in 1952 by Bernard Berenson: *The Arch of Constantine, or The Decline of Form.*

About all that can be said of most recent building, on every scale, in this country is this: American building is not quite so wretched as building today in most of the rest of the world. Recently I spent a few hours—as much time as I could endure—in the City of London, once dominated by St. Paul's and the Tower. Here Caesar built his fortress on the Thames, and the hideous new museum of the City of London is full of Roman artifacts. The City, for centuries past the financial center of British Empire and Commonwealth, was badly smashed by German bombs; strange to say, some of the damage still has not been cleared up. But the City has been rebuilt, of really nasty gray concrete, already badly streaked, obscuring the great dome of Wren's cathedral, elbowing aside the Tower, supplanting the old picturesque confusion of the streets by a new ugly confusion worse confounded. This "Barbican Scheme" betrays the failure of intellect and imagination throughout Britain since the Second World War. What has been done in the neighborhood of the Barbican is a disgrace to England so embarrassing that few people mention it. Even in a Communist state, such an architectural atrocity would not be permitted, and the engulfing of the famous cathedral by dismal office buildings would be rejected. Surely it is not from Britain today that a revival of architectural imagination can be expected. Nor do we encounter imaginative building in Germany, France, Italy, or Scandinavia. Everywhere it is the architecture of the mass-age, so far as lodging goes; and the architecture of the bureaucrats' epoch, so far as public buildings are in question.

Well, do I give you naught for your comfort? Do we descend steadily, and now somewhat speedily, toward a colossal architecture of unparalleled dreariness, and a colossal state of unparalleled uniformity—at best Tocqueville's "democratic despotism"? Will all of us labor under a profound depression of spirits (in part conscious, in part below the level of consciousness) because of the boring and servile architecture about us? And will the society now taking form in America resign itself to a parallel barrennesss of soul and mind, under a political domination of unimaginative and complacent bureaucrats?

No, not necessarily. Let us leave historical determinism to the Marxists and other ideologues. The courses of nations depend upon the energy and the talents of particular individuals—and upon Providence, always inscrutable. Edmund Burke, at the time when the triumph of Jacobinism seemed to many the ineluctable "wave of the future," declared that the act of a single person may alter what had appeared to be fixed fate. "The death of a man at a critical juncture, his disgust, his retreat, his disgrace, have brought innumerable calamities on a whole nation. A common soldier, a child, a girl at the door of an inn, have changed the face of fortune, and almost of Nature." (Burke's "common soldier" is Arnold of Winkelried, who broke in upon the spears at Sempach; his child is Hannibal, taking at the age of twelve his oath to make undying war upon Rome; his girl at the inn is Joan of Arc.) It remains true even in this mass-age of ours that individual genius and courage—or, at least, the imagination and boldness of a handful

of men and women — may leaven the lump of dullness and apathy, all across the land. Something of that sort has just occured among us, in practical politics.

Quite as new discoveries and speculations about the Shroud of Turin may bring on a widespread renewal of the life of spirit, among the learned as among the credulous, so a reinvigoration of architecture and of urban planning conceivably may come about from causes which at present no one guesses. The architectural and artistic charlatan, leagued with the spoilsman and the bureaucrat, may be thrust aside, rather abruptly, by a new breed of architects and artists endowed with the moral imagination. There have been ages when an architecture of vigor and freedom flourished, nurtured by myth and symbol and human confidence. Given faith and hope, it is yet conceivable that we may draw upon the architectural well of the past to bring into being an architecture (in its larger sense) strong and humane. I have endeavored to diagnose the architectural malady; others must prescribe the remedies.