

Vive les villes nouvelles!

The idea of new towns to ease the strains on existing cities looked, at the annual general meeting of the Town and Country Planning Association, like providing the basis for a new Entente Cordiale. M. Jacques Riboud, a leading French industrialist and developer, had been invited by the TCPA to air his views about new towns in Britain and France. M. Riboud is an admiring critic of the British new towns; in his books, especially *Développement Urbain* (1968) he advocates a policy close to that of Ebenezer Howard's "Social Cities" with one-family houses near work places and the country, regionally planned to foster a high degree of economic and cultural development.

MAY I say why I find it so refreshing to be here: because at last there is one place where something useful can be discussed and some progress made. Why is this so? I think because the TCPA has a simple and clear philosophy which boils down to two points: firstly, that urban development and the way in which it is accomplished is very important to mankind, and secondly, that the best approach is the creation of new towns. This is simple, clear, very true, and very important. It has always puzzled me that something which is clear and important does not get across better. As you know, Great Britain is far ahead in this respect, but it does not come across too well in France.

Only "grandes ensembles" in France

I can give you, as an example, the fact that I was in our "Plan"* in charge of a committee which was supposed to trace the lines for urban development. I don't know if you know what it is. I don't know if you have heard of that institution which the French like very much because it has all the appearance of authority without having any! In the Plan, I made an extensive report about the way urban development should be done, and this report, I must admit, lay under an enormous amount of paper and did not make an impact. That is why I have written this new book,† in order to try to get through this legal barrage which the planners laid in front of me. It is not true that the idea of new towns did not make any progress—it did make some progress, and I will tell you more about it, as I think you might be interested. We have for many years taken steps on the road to new towns, although it is not what would be called a new town in England. It is what we call "grandes ensembles". All those of you who have travelled in France have seen on the outskirts of almost every town these high-rise apartment buildings—these are the new "ensembles" which are something which you—and you must thank God for it—have not much of in Northern Europe. (I must admit that

* Commissariat du Plan.

† *Développement Urbain* by Jacques Riboud, Edition Mazarine, Paris, Fr. 18.

I am a little disconcerted, I have seen some skyscrapers in London today.) We have these ensembles and they make up a big section of the towns. They might be very big, because some of them have a population of 50,000, which is a good size, but they cannot be called new towns for several reasons. One reason is that they have no work-places and the people are supposed to work in the big centre nearby. And they do not have amenities; these also are to be found in the city. And lastly, they are always built on the outskirts of the main city, so they cannot really be called new towns. There is some progress being made, and, as I told you, I have wondered why progress has not been faster. Why is there this resistance and delay? On the face of it, it seems strange, because this is a very important problem, as you all know. Why is it that the solution, which is so simple and so important for us and our children, is not recognized?

The wrong image

Well, you know when a manufacturer (and after all, I am an industrialist), manufactures goods which do not sell, manufactures products and he knows they are reasonably priced and that the product is good, why is it that the product remains on the shelf and doesn't find more customers? There is a reason—the reason is usually that the people have an image of the product which is not right. And I think that in the case of new towns (I want to say that I am speaking about France; I would not be bold enough to speak about Great Britain) the idea has been successful but has not made very much progress. The image the people have of the new towns, which is not a correct one, has alarmed them, and I am trying to tell you what it is that frightens them. Firstly, they usually associate the idea of a new town with a *big* town or some big place they do not like. They do not like large towns or large cities. I have a personal example: when we wanted to build a large part of a new town near Paris we had to have an inquiry and the response of the people was very much against it. The reason given was this: they don't want large cities—small ones, yes, but large ones, no.

Government interference

The second reason is that they are the work of the Government—or the people think, because of the image they have, that the Government will take over, will run the show and take away from the communes the administrative responsibility that they have. So, the people are afraid, and, mostly, the elected bodies are afraid to see the Government—what the Americans call “big government”—take over.

Brasilia

The third reason is a matter of aspect—the way it looks—and this boils down to architecture. For them a new town is Brasilia. Brasilia has been so much talked about that when they hear about a new town they think about Brasilia and they do not want this image of a new town. I think these are the reasons why the new towns have a false image—not completely wrong, but partly wrong—and that is why we have so much difficulty in getting the principle of new towns adopted.

Old cities nurture the new

Now, let us see what could be done. After all, we do want to sell the idea of new towns. What should be done to achieve this? Well, I think in order

to expand this idea of the new town principle in France, we should act on these three things that I mentioned. First, I think it should be demonstrated that new towns are not necessarily big, but may be part of a big complex, because I agree entirely that we cannot have, and there is not much future for, a small city lost in the bottom of a province. But we should have another place for people to work. I think that the places where the people work should be small, 30,000 to 50,000 people, and five to ten of these making the big new towns we are talking about. And I think also that these undertakings should not only be the work of the central government. I think that in France it should be delegated and it should be the work of the local authorities. Let's take an example: let's suppose there is a city of 200,000 people which is facing the problem of growth and expects to grow at a rate of, let us say, 2 to 3 per cent—a fair rate of growth for a city—well, the mayor of the city should be persuaded instead of packing more buildings within his city or letting his city overflow, to buy, let us say, 500 or 1,000 acres, five or six miles from his city and there build another city for 30,000 people. This is not a major undertaking. This is fairly easy to do. Then make it as attractive as possible, so the secondary city will fill and a third one will be created two or three years later. All these cities would be very well connected together and then the major city would have, of course, a responsibility to them, to nurture them and to raise the secondary cities until they had matured and could be left on their own. I think that by doing this and making the people understand it, we could overcome two at least of the three objections I mentioned—overcome the resistance of people to the idea of what they think is a big city, resistance of the people to the fact of seeing big government intruding into their affairs. This does not mean that people will live in small cities, but they will have their houses in small cities and can travel all around a big complex which might be 300,000 or 400,000 people.

Unpopular domino style

Now, I come to the third point, which is the question of aspect and aesthetics. There has been an enormous amount of fight and discussion in France (I don't know about here) about this question of aspect. I think the French made the mistake of letting the architect run the show in respect of these urban developments. This does not mean that I have not a great admiration for architects, on the contrary I think they are most important, but I do not think they understand the specific problems which are the problems of urban creation. And I think that, at least in France, the shape and the forms they gave, especially to these ensembles, has resulted in a form of high-rise concentrated building, which we call in France "domino style"—and this is responsible for the very low popularity of the ensembles and of the new town idea.

Experimenting with people's happiness

I think personally that it is also considered important to have these new towns and all this urban expansion to create a "mark of our time, to give to the generations which will follow us an idea of the power of science" . . . well, you all know that! I do not know if you read architectural magazines! Well, I think that new towns and urban places are no place for experiment and for letting what I call unbridled architects play, because, after all, they play with the minds of people, with the happiness of people. They have no right to do so. I think it is in these places where people are going to live that the environ-

ment is so important, as the people who are going to live there are often people from very small places. In France they come mainly from small places, while here, you have made your migration from country to town. This is not so in France where they still have an important population on the farms, a population which is moving. I think the biggest and most important transformation we have had in the last ten years in France is the transformation of the farms. This is not well known, but this is where you will find the greatest change. So, this means that the people now in these new cities come from the farm or the small cities. They are not used to having environment created for them by fancy architects in modern styles. What they need is something which gives them a feeling which alleviates the harshness of having moved. And in order to have that they must have an environment which gives them a feeling of security, of safety. This means that we should not be embarrassed by asking for an environment, an architecture, which moves very slowly, and I would not be embarrassed even to ask them to copy the forms of the past. While it would be foolish to have architectural evolution stopped, we can, on the contrary, give a free hand to new ideas in public places for public buildings.

Architectural in-fighting

This should be discussed and there should be some people fighting . . . you know, this kind of fight in architecture is very typical—nobody listens to what the others say and nothing ever comes out of the discussion—but I think it would be useful and it is a suggestion I make: to discuss it, openly, and to have architects, and designers, and psychiatrists, and . . . even *people!* After all, why should the people who live in places not have their ideas about them? I think they should come and give their ideas and openly have some kind of convention, and if you organize one, I should certainly be glad to come and give my ideas, in order to give some kind of guide line, so that when people feel the way I feel they will not feel embarrassed to say so.

French progress

Well, I will now go back to France to tell you a little more about what we are doing in these new towns. On the way to the new towns we stopped at the *grandes ensembles*, but let us resume our progress. We have made some progress on the new town principle. The idea is being received with the problems I mentioned; there are eight new towns being planned around Paris, one is being planned near Lille, one near Marseilles, and one near Rouen, and they really are new towns in the true meaning of the words. In one of them I started to build before they decided to put a new town in the area and I do not know if I must be glad or sad to see the Government moving in because it does not make my work any easier and I keep thinking that the Government do everything five times more expensively and five times more slowly than I do. Well, that tells you on what side I am! However, the plans, I think, are satisfactory and I think the Government was right in founding what we call the District of Paris.

Trappes

Of all these towns, I can only talk about one, because this is the one of which I am building a part, Trappes. This is the way it is conceived: the new town is planned for 300,000 people, but it will be composed of six new areas that are completely separated, each one of which will be 30,000 to 40,000

people, only one of them being, I think, 80,000, this being the city centre; each one of course having all the things of a city of its size; all of them being well connected with open space having green land between them. That I think is a very satisfactory plan and I have no objection to it not only because I found some of the recommendations I had made being put into practice. This is being built and if you come to France, going westwards on the road to Rambouillet, you will see part of the town being built. So, I think we are on the right road, but it is still very very little, because so far only a few thousand people have been housed in these new cities all over France. Also, I must mention some new towns which have been built along the coast of the Mediterranean, which are mainly for vacations.