

# Looking Down on Cities

BY GEORGE CLARKE

The Yankees are at present highly productive of bulky books on things as they stand at "mid-century". So far they have not published a "Metropolis at Mid-Century" but it is not yet too late. Should such a book arise, we might expect it to deal with the contrasting *doom* and *boom* attitudes to the 1950 metropolis; we could expect some significant comment on the bizarre atomic defence rehearsals nowadays held in New York and on the notwithstanding continual growth and spread of big cities.

Although we in Sydney have not yet institutionalised a metropolitan death-wish as have New Yorkers, we have had plenty of evidence of metropolitan vulnerability on other issues. Electricity and water shortages caused by wartime investment-lags and lengthening lines of supply, traffic strangulation, transport, power, fire brigade and sanitary strikes have made us realise that complex artificial modes of metropolitan activity are highly sensitive to minor breakdowns.

Our cities are now bigger, more highly strung, perhaps more liable to internal breakdown, and certainly under greater threat of external destruction than ever before.

It is the intention of this article to raise a few issues regarding the common problems of modern cities, to point out to some specialists the ways in which they might relate their sectional enquiries to a comprehensive view of the city.

The metropolis is the most blatantly obvious distinguishing feature of 19th and 20th century civilisation. Over 50 per cent of our populations now live in large cities—over 50 per cent of the work-force is occupied in tertiary, or service, industry; that is 50 per cent of the work-force produces no material goods. The metropolitan economy and the metropolitan psyche dominate both the physical and personal worlds.

If the foregoing has been sufficient introduction, gentle reader, you will be prepared to grant that the characteristics of the modern metropolis as such are especially relevant to any examination of contemporary culture. If you are one of that particular minority group interested in the preservation of culture, as such, you may concede the possible usefulness of studying those characteristics, of discovering present trends in city life, and of postulating hypotheses about the future of cities. Having done these things by use of scientific methods, you might even venture out of the field of enquiry

into the arena of action. You might form moral judgements about whether you want to resist or assist the existing probabilities.

However, you may well shy at the very size, blatancy, and physical and social formlessness of the metropolis. The study of cities, of the concept *city*, has been a neglected field; many observers have adopted a sort of nominalist view that the word *city* is merely a name given to a conglomeration of individuals and separate buildings, and that to seek any reality in the city as such is a vain quest.

Nevertheless, that it *is* vain can only be established by further enquiry; and even though the study of cities has been an unrewarding task to those seeking rational laws—in the same way as has economics—recent developments are increasing the strain on those responsible for managing cities: managerial problems are requiring thorough analysis. The creative problems of city or culture builders are no longer simply architectural or aesthetic.

Students of economics are not dissuaded by the difficulties they find in trying to discover the characteristics of the national economy. They are occasionally successful in uncovering trends; they can distinguish between possibilities and probabilities; their work is increasingly in demand by policy makers, and the metropolitan economy requires more and more props for survival, more and more conscious control. The students of cities face much the same position.

The urban enquirer, like so many others, can begin with the Greeks: "Men came together in cities in order to live," said Aristotle. "They remained together in order to live the good life." Concepts of cities have, then, a great deal to do with concepts of "the good life"—with concepts of purpose. The physical fabric of the modern city is the embodiment of materialist views of the good life. Concepts of the good life are multitudinous, and the city is the battleground on which the exponents of conflicting views fight it out in intellectual as well as economic terms. It is perhaps this very conflict which is an essential ingredient of the good—the conflict of ideas in general producing a dynamic culture.

In the horrid 19th century, the city—like all other secondary creations of the machine—was supposed to regulate itself and not to require study or interference. Such studies and interference began when cities continued to throw up blocks to the good life, hindrances to too many views of it, hindrances that could not be eliminated by simple expedients or palliatives.

The genesis of modern city study and modern city morality (i.e. city planning) was largely in that fear of social revolution very seriously entertained by leading Englishmen of the 19th century. Alleviation of slum conditions, subsidies on workmen's railway fares from outer suburbs, the building of some *Garden Cities* was to a surprising extent initiated by enlightened self-interest. Indeed one

industrialist, at the opening of his garden city project, directly stated that his paternalism had been prompted by fear of social revolution.

This is one example of a repeated capacity for self-preservation, a willingness to interfere in the free interplay of conflicting forces, which has so far allowed the metropolis to develop without catastrophe.

Fire regulations, health regulations, building codes, green belts are typical examples of standard self-disciplines required of big cities.

We now know how to avoid the great fires and plagues of the past, but there are other aesthetic, economic, political, social and technological problems which bring new threats or which we now have a perfectionist urge to tackle. These problems remain of academic interest until they do in fact become threats. Then a policy or a collection of policies becomes necessary; action of some sort is required. The cure can be worse than the disease, but the success of such policies will largely depend on the extent to which they are based on and altered in relation to objective enquiry.

Not only are cities becoming more complex, but they are also multiplying quantitatively; there are now sufficient cities for a random choice to yield evidence of common features. We can look down on cities in the abstract, while aeroplanes, helicopters, airphotos and multi-story buildings also enable us to look down on cities in the concrete. Large views in the abstract depend on large views in the concrete.

The study of how people behave in cities is largely a study of groups, of family cells, and of associations of individuals pursuing secondary aims. The basic group is the family; while the city itself has its own interests, is a powerful group acting in national life. In this latter situation it is usually found opposing other interests, ~~and~~ those of primary producers or of other cities for example.

Each group is the best guardian of its own interests. In as much as this makes group behaviour consistent and predictable, one could label enquiry into group behaviour a social science. City planning is based on a social science; science—pure—deals only with that which it can measure, social science can measure only probabilities based on statistical trends.

“The social world is not devoid of a measure of rationality if approached with the expectations of Macbethian cynicism. It is this measure of rationality which can justify social planning. . . Since this rationality consists in a limited number of potential trends, one of which is bound to materialise, social planning, correctly understood, is the marshalling of human and material forces in rational anticipation of those potential trends.” \*

\* Morgenthau, Hans J., *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, University of Chicago Press, 1946: p. 151.

These are the basic tenets of land-use planning and those other techniques of city discipline which must inevitably develop in the near future.

The "organic" analogy has been highly developed in recent years to describe the development of cities in biological terms. Organisms are living and ever changing, they grow and they can decay, they encompass contradictory tendencies to develop in different ways, and they are continually adapting themselves to the more powerful of these tendencies.

This analogy has been coming more and more under attack by those who reasonably complain that it is being carried too far; that such Spenglerian concepts lead to the entirely unwarranted assumption that our cities will die, must inevitably and rapidly collapse.

However, the prophets of doom are always with us; to-day the influence of Mumford is particularly strong, and recent A.B.C. discussions of decentralisation have reflected this preoccupation with impending disaster; the examples of Babylon, Nineveh and Tyre were quoted. Mumford has seduced a generation with visions of "regional" autonomy, a harking back to a decentralised medieval environment; a rational, moralist vision impossible to achieve in a sensate culture.

Most cities, Sydney being no exception, are built slowly by generations of people who have been forced by circumstances to live together. Many theories have been held as to how men first came to live in embryo urban settlements. It has long been popular to maintain that "man is a gregarious animal" and that some such instinctive gregariousness first led men to come together in villages. It is sometimes possible to believe that people live in cities because they love one another, but a sounder explanation is probably that close mutual dependence can best satisfy needs for both material and emotional security.

A 20th century western city is first of all an economic phenomenon; it exists because individuals and groups of people bargain, trade, make contracts with one another for the supply of food, diamond rings, houses, motor cars, and narcotics. "The unique features of the great modern city — its *raison d'être*, its organisation, and its special structure — can only be understood in terms of the contractualistic value system under which it has emerged." \*

The economic structure of a city in the throes of early industrial development is contrived in such a way that concentration and more concentration spells efficiency in immediate economic terms. Sydney has not yet seen the end of its centralising momentum. Many people think that it will have no end.

\* Ratcliff, Richard U., *Urban Land Economics*, McGraw Hill, 1929.