

24.8.1962

THE ORGANISATION OF URBAN RENEWAL

A Paper by W.G. Clarke, B.Arch. (Syd.), Dip. T.P. (Lond.), M.C.P. (M.I.T.), M.A.P.I., A.M.T.P.I., A.R.A.I.A., A.R.I.B.A., City Planner, delivered at the Thirty Sixth Congress of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, Sydney, August 24th, 1962.

The health, and ultimately, the survival, of men and institutions in a rapidly changing world, depends upon their capacity for changing with the times. So it is with empires, and so with cities. Our greatest danger today is that our capacity for radical innovations in social and political organisation continues to lag behind our astonishing abilities in science and technology.

Let me briefly mention some random examples of this disparity. We have, for instance, global weapons systems, but no effective global political system. We can solve the technical or medical problems of reducing the world's death rate, but we cannot make any impact upon the social and cultural problems of reducing the world's birth rate. We can produce motor cars and other public and private vehicles all too easily, but cannot devise social means of financing and organising an effective metropolitan transportation system. Finally, it seems that cosmonauts will be building new towns on the moon before the City of Sydney will prepare and agree to adopt and implement a workable and worthwhile city development plan.

We can, when given half a chance, display extraordinary virtuosity in large-scale architectural design and in structural techniques, but we remain tied to obsolete and self-destructive methods of city development administration, to outmoded concepts of property development and to techniques of city land subdivision and ownership which can mildly be described as archaic.

The largeness of scale involved in comprehensive city design and construction cannot be the reason for our failure in this field. We do other big scale things relatively easily. The N.S.W. Department of Public Works can, for example, handle the technical problems of a great school building programme on sites dotted over the entire State.

A body like the Sydney Water Board can handle the technical problems of laying and maintaining huge regional utility systems. We are quite skilled in these and other separate feats of technical organisation, but we are not half so good at co-ordinating these kinds of isolated elements so as to create towns, cities and metropolitan communities really worth living in and living for. It is the old story of specialisation - individual men and individual authorities tend to know more and more about less and less. We tend to have cities which are mere collections of spare parts, which do not fit together to make a workable environment.

All, however, is not yet lost. Human ingenuity reveals itself, for example, in the intricacies of company law. People who are complete strangers to one another can act together in joint enterprises as private and public companies. These can achieve marvels of corporate complexity and of co-operative enterprise. We should be able to adapt some of the same techniques to our needs for joint civic development enterprises.

Successful examples of comprehensive area developments in Australia are the Commonwealth Government's projects for the Snowy Mountains and the design and construction of Canberra. The all-powerful national government can command the men, money and imagination needed to carry out such comprehensive planning schemes, but the Commonwealth's achievement in comprehensive area development and social planning are so far almost unique in Australia. Why is this so ? What is the key factor which distinguishes success from failure in these matters ? It is, at base, a matter of unified leadership and control. It is a matter of power, either given or assumed. It is disarmingly simple, and painfully obvious, to say that a clear set of goals and sufficient power to achieve those goals are necessary for success in any human enterprise.

When we look at the older central sections of our metropolitan areas, we see that they are physically disorganised, ugly, inconvenient, inefficient and inhuman. The new "prestige" office buildings in the city centre are too sadly like superficial gold fillings in a mouthful of decay.

But this is a situation caused by decades of neglect, mindlessness

and insensitivity. The necessity for comprehensive city planning and design has finally come to be popularly recognised, even in Australia. Notwithstanding this popular recognition, corrective action is being indefinitely stymied because, particularly in Sydney, there is a vacuum of effective civic power, civic leadership and civic organisation.

A big modern city is made up not only of streets and buildings but also of people - groups, firms, institutions and government agencies. All of these enjoy power, influence, leadership and organisation in different ways and to different degrees. No one person, group, firm, institution or government body is strong enough to lead all the others in policies and plans covering the whole city or metropolis. The formal power structure of a democracy is consciously and deliberately designed to make it virtually impossible for any one group or section to dominate all the others. In fact, the balance of influence is such that many sectional groups commonly enjoy a "veto power" - so that planned action of any kind can be stopped by any one of a number of groups.

In this situation, a City Government may possess all kinds of theoretical statutory powers, but have no real power of civic leadership, and exercise no real social or civic creativity. This is particularly so if local government is firmly and almost exclusively dominated by one political party. The Town Hall then tends to be deserted by all those who have any real contact with the other half of the community. The Town Hall ceases to serve as a common meeting ground for all sections of the whole community. Many of the people whose influence, assistance, sympathy and advice are needed if civic enterprises like urban renewal are to succeed, lose all contact whatsoever with the Town Hall and its somewhat lonely occupants.

This, briefly, is the tragedy of civic disunity and lack of civic leadership which so many Australian and American cities have suffered. Cities which are socially and politically unorganised in this way cannot reshape or renew themselves successfully.

They cannot change with the times. While they appear to flourish in easy times, their prospects for long-term prosperity and stability are being progressively weakened.

Urban Renewal in the second half of the twentieth century is a very concrete job which demands general community mobilisation of a new type. The best definition of it is perhaps "the systematic application of all the powers of government, in partnership with private enterprise, to the reshaping of the urban environment to better meet the needs of modern society, with special reference to the obsolete and decaying areas of cities, where the immediate need and opportunity is greatest."

Our past efforts to reasonably reshape our cities have been ineffective because plans have only partially been worked out for small unrelated bits of the city, by bodies or groups which are, by themselves, too weak or too sectional to implement any proper plan. No single body or group has, in itself, a sufficiently wide vision, sufficient research, design or management ability or sufficient political or financial strength to recognise what needs to be done and to do it. The city has many interest groups and many leaders. None can "go it alone". The comprehensive city plan must be acceptable to all major sections of the community before it is formally adopted. Therefore, the leaders of all major sections of the community must be intimately involved in its preparation. Leaders of all the major interest groups must participate in, or be fully consulted about, the preparation of the comprehensive plan, so that every effort can be made to reach agreed creative compromises and practical accommodations before the plan is formally put up for official ratification. Otherwise the plan will be "dead on arrival".

Widespread participation by non-governmental community leaders during the planning stage is vital to the successful implementation of the plan. Implementation of any proper three dimensional urban design plan will require the action of many men, the organised investment of much money, and the re-use of much costly, inner-city land. All this cannot, in our society, be done by government.

It must therefore be actively carried out by consortiums of our most powerful non-governmental groups, bodies and institutions. These people simply won't implement a plan which they have had no share in making.

I have now, I trust, given a sufficiently broad overall picture of the organisational requirements for successful urban renewal.

The details of how best to constitute a specific city planning and renewal operation will, of course, vary from city to city and from time to time. I feel that Australians need first to comprehend, appreciate and accept the broad principles of citizen participation in city planning. Having done that, their native wit and ingenuity will carry them through the stages of setting up specific committee and staffing structures.

I do feel, however, that an outline of a highly successful U.S. example would be helpful. Active partnership between city government and the informal city power structure has been going on in the City of Providence, Rhode Island, for the past six years. I was myself fortunate enough to work on this project for the City of Providence as a City Planner and Urban Designer and therefore have some experience of its internal practical details.

Downtown Providence is the heart of a city region of about 800,000 people. In March, 1955, the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce set up the Downtown Business Co-ordinating Council to see what could be done to renew and revitalize the city centre. This Council together with the City Council's City Plan Commission negotiated with the U.S. Federal Urban Renewal Administration. In May, 1957 the U.R.A. agreed to contribute two-thirds of the cost of preparing a thorough-going comprehensive city plan and urban renewal programme. The project was to be a demonstration pilot study of "the extent to which the civic and business groups interested in the downtown area can participate practically and constructively with an official planning agency and city government in developing plans, policies and programmes for the renewal of the downtown area".

In the five years since then, the project has proved to be a resounding success in every way. Reconstruction of downtown Providence is now under way. The various pieces of the plan are being built separately by all kinds of public, semi-public and private bodies. But each piece is a pre-planned part of a comprehensively designed city centre.

The Downtown Business Co-ordinating Council raised a large part of the cash needed for planning. A 15 member Master Plan Advisory Committee was set up, representing the informal, but very real, non-governmental power structure of the city. Four Task Forces, or sub-committees, were set up to work with the city planning project director and his staff on specific aspects of the work. These covered:-

1. Human Relations and Housing
2. Public Relations
3. Design
4. Financial and Legal Implementation.

Altogether, the Master Plan Advisory Committee and the Four Task Forces comprised 56 of the leading and most influential and representative citizens of the city. These people contributed to the plan in meetings, discussions and negotiations. They guided, advised, assisted, criticised, and worked alongside the full-time city planning staff. They had no legal or formal political power. Their official function was purely advisory. But by their tough-minded idealism they made possible the preparation of a comprehensive three dimensional urban design plan for the city - a plan which satisfied in a truly creative and imaginative way all the major needs and interests of all sections of the community.

This type of organisation, dependent on free co-operation between the leaders of normally indifferent or antagonistic groups, has its prime value in the informal processes of leaders learning to meet, talk, plan and act together in a mature fashion for their mutual benefit. They are brought together under the auspices of the city government. They have much to teach the professional city planners, who in turn have much to teach them.

Leaders of the press and other media who participated in the Providence Task Forces served their traditional twin functions. They acted both

as interpreters of the plans to the public and as watchdogs for the general public. Church, labour and finance leaders also fulfill several functions in this type of organisation. Their presence protects the vital interests of their own people. They can interpret and sell the plan to their respective flocks whose support is essential when it comes to the political, legal and financial steps of plan implementation.

The detailed story of the Providence Plan is told in a large 250 page book entitled "Providence 1970" published by the City Plan Commission in May, 1961. This was the date of formal presentation of the completed plan to the public and the legislatures. But even before publication of the completed plan, major steps had been taken towards its implementation, and these are detailed in the published report.

To many Australians all that I have said in this paper may seem like sheer fantasy. I remind you again that the Providence Project is merely one of many such projects throughout the U.S., that it is the subject of U.S. Federal Government policy, that it is fully documented in published material to be examined by anyone.

I now feel it necessary to refer back to previous published papers of mine on this subject in which I have given my opinion that "the problems of U.S. cities are more akin to those of our own cities than are those of Europe, including the U.K. Also, the techniques available to us in the organising and financing of renewal are more similar to those available in the U.S. than to those in Europe, at the very least because we, like the Americans, still retain a 'mixed' economy, in which Local Government is politically weak and badly financed."

The recent great European achievements in urban renewal are the products of strong Local Government, backed by strong planning and building powers, financed by large national money grants, and directly employing large numbers of the most talented and qualified professional people in the world. These achievements have been largely the achievements of an imaginative, humanistic and powerful governmental elite. It would be wonderful if we could emulate all the achievements of Europe, but my experience leads me to believe that, while we must try

to emulate the design quality of what the Europeans build, we can progress faster by emulating the American resourcefulness in social and political technique.

In conclusion, I should like to refer to the current local state of city planning in both Sydney and Melbourne. In private, disinterested and qualified people, both inside and outside local government and the public service, acknowledge that neither city has made or is making any real progress in comprehensive city planning. The Draft Planning Scheme for the City of Sydney, apart from the Expressway proposals incorporated in it, is not worth the paper it is printed on, although it is obviously difficult for anyone to admit this in public. The recent central area building boom in Sydney and Melbourne has been completely uncontrolled by any overall intelligence and has created enormous problems for the future. Shortages of money and of qualified staff are not the whole reason for this situation. The real reason lies in a failure of nerve, a lack of civic unity, and the absence of leadership.

The future prosperity, beauty, efficiency, social stability and convenience of the City of Sydney lies in the hands of the citizens of Sydney themselves. Leadership in urban renewal must come from the leading private citizens and elected representatives of the City. It is not a job for the Federal, or even for the State Government to take the initial steps and to continue to spoon-feed the citizenry. The State Government can legislate for and help to administer and finance comprehensive urban renewal, but it can only act if the informal city power structure and the leaders of public opinion can demonstrate a desire and a capacity to work together in unison for the long-range best development of the city.

The job to be done must start with the preparation of a three dimensional comprehensive city plan and a programme for a series of urban renewal and development projects, in line with the best practice of cities like London, Stockholm, Philadelphia, Providence and the rest. How much longer are we to delay ? Each of us has something to contribute. Where are our leaders ?

REFERENCES:

Downtown Providence

Report Number One - Survey.

Providence City Plan Commission, October 1958,
Seven Sections with Appendices. Illus.

Downtown Providence 1970

Master Plan Report, Providence City Plan Commission,
May 1961. 250 pp. illus.

Community Power Structure

A Study of Decision Makers by Floyd Hunter.
Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press,
1953. 275 pp.

Recent U.S. Experience in Urban Renewal and its Relevance to Australian Opportunities for Comprehensive City-Building.

A Paper by W.G. Clarke, Australian Planning
Institute Journal, June and September 1960.

The Death and Life of Great American Cities

Jane Jacobs. Random House, N.Y., 1961.
458 pp.