

Ten Failures that Shaped the 20th Century American City

by Laurence C. Gerckens, AICP

1 THE DEMISE OF COMMUNITY-ORIENTED DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT

Prior to the widespread adoption of zoning in the late 1920s, many of the most notable successes in housing and neighborhood design and planning were the work of government agencies or limited dividend corporations. Plans for communities such as Forest Hills Gardens, New York (built by the Russell Sage Foundation); Yorkship Village, New Jersey and Union Park Gardens, Delaware (built by the federal government during World War I); and Radburn, New Jersey and Sunnyside Gardens, New York (developed by the City Housing Corporation) still serve as models of creative design.

In these community developments, architects, landscape architects, engineers, and builders cooperated in the integrated construction of entire neighborhoods, often complete with schools, parks, and local shopping areas. This allowed for economies of scale and improvements in building and land assembly practices, resulting in lower costs.

Ironically, one of most notable successes of early twentieth century planners, the introduction of zoning (see page 4 of *Successes* article), when combined with the conservative,

Editor's Note: Unless otherwise indicated, sidebars were prepared by the Planning Commissioners Journal's editorial staff.

market-driven climate of the 1920s, helped spell the end of this community-oriented approach to land development. Regulation of private one-lot-at-a-time development was touted as providing the same advantages as direct neighborhood construction – without community cost or the use of government land acquisition authority. Unfortunately, reliance on zoning had the effect of undermining some of the important planning values integral to these early twentieth century, neighborhood-oriented developments.

In fact, zoning most often facilitated a land-speculation-based, neighborhood-quality-less, and increasingly high-cost

residential sprawl that failed to meet the housing and public service needs of those without high spending power. It is interesting to note, however, that a growing number of planners and designers are drawing lessons from the early planned communities in shaping new patterns of development. *Editor's Note: see Philip Langdon's article "New Development, Traditional Patterns" in PCJ #36 (Fall 1999).*

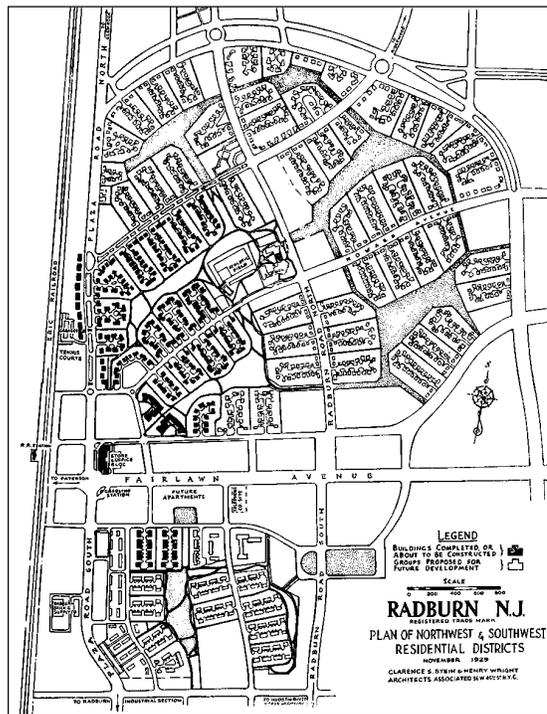
2 THE LOST VISION OF REGIONAL PLANNING

Regional planning, originally based on concepts enunciated by Patrick Geddes of Edinburgh, Scotland in *Cities in Evolution* (1915), was brought to America by Geddes' protege, Lewis Mumford, and propounded by Benton MacKaye in *The New Exploration* (1924). See page 10 for excerpts from *The New Exploration*. Geddes proposed careful forethought in the development of each urban region, a region extending from the mountainous edges of macro-watersheds to the sea. His "regional planning" gave equal emphasis to water supply, erosion, timberland, cropland, community sub-groupings, and urban centers, viewing the region as a symbiotic whole.

To Geddes and his followers, regional planning was a means of seeing urban areas in their broader context. Regional planning was intended to regulate and "nodulate" urban incursions into the surrounding countryside. By preserving broad bands of forest and farmland between urban areas, the unique life styles of city, village, and farm would be maintained.

Creation of the first county planning commission in America, at Los Angeles

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Clarence Stein and Henry Wright's 1929 plan for Radburn focused on establishing walkable "neighborhood units." The goal was to integrate shopping and office space within walking distance of residences, and to avoid having the automobile overwhelm the environment. The plan for Radburn not only provided an extensive network of walkways, but also included generous amounts of green space.

Metropolitan Fragmentation & Segregation

Former Albuquerque, New Mexico, Mayor David Rusk has done some excellent research on municipal governance issues, including the question of whether the fragmentation of metropolitan areas into multiple units of government is associated with residential segregation.

As Rusk observes: "For most Americans, smaller is better and home rule is an unassailable democratic good. But the sad reality is that the smaller the local jurisdiction or school district, the more narrow and exclusive the population served. In general, the more highly fragmented a metro area is, the more segregated it is racially and economically. ... areas characterized by geographically large, multi-powered governments and unified school systems tend to promote more racial and economic integration and achieve greater social mobility."

According to Rusk, "the critical issue is the number of different governments that control planning and zoning decisions. ... what is clear is that, absent federal or state mandates, a metro area in which local government is highly fragmented is usually incapable of adopting broad, integrating strategies."

From David Rusk, *Cities Without Suburbs, Second Edition* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Press Center Press, 1995), 33-34.

St. Louis Metro Area Municipalities shown right: According to a report of St. Louis 2004, a non-profit organization promoting regional cooperation, St. Louis ranked fifth (in 1992) among America's thirty-five largest metro areas, in number of government units with 771. As former Senator John C. Danforth noted in the organization's 1997 "Report to the Community": "Our region of 2.5 million people consists of two states, the City of St. Louis, eleven surrounding counties, and a multitude of municipalities, school districts, taxing authorities and government service providers. It is a system that encourages jealousies and fosters stalemate. ... A comprehensive answer to our problems of governance is probably beyond our reach, but the status quo is absolutely unacceptable. If we are to be a leader in the 21st century, we should, at the least, look for regional solutions to specific examples of governmental gridlock." Map at right from Savitch (editor), *Regional Politics: America in a post-cityage* (1996). Figure 4.2. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications.

Ten Failures...

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County in 1922, seemed to be a step toward bringing Geddes' vision to fruition as it extended "city planning" to include agriculture, forestry, and erosion control. But the *Regional Plan of New York and Environs* (1929) redirected American regional planning, associating it primarily with planning for metropolitan expansion, through the provision of large-scale transportation systems and mass recreation areas. Whether intentionally or not, American regional planning too often became a means for implementing exactly those conditions that Geddes, MacKaye, and others intended it to prevent.

3 THE FRAGMENTED NATURE OF METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE

Laws empowering individual communities to plan and act to fulfill their own definitions of the public interest might well have made sense at the beginning of the twentieth century when urban settlements were small and isolated from one another. But such "home rule," when engaged in by a plethora of communities within a metropolitan area, led to the failure to

address pressing area-wide issues.

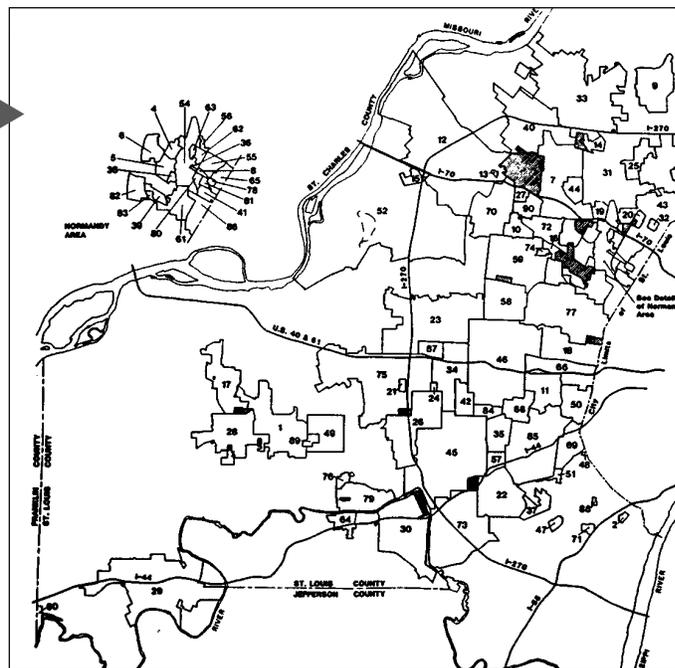
Perhaps the most telling case-in-point was the failure of school desegregation efforts. These efforts failed, in large part, because the unit dealt with was the individual segregated school district and not the metropolitan region. One could flee from the once segregated central school district to an all-white suburban school district with impunity. This "white flight" contributed to intensification of the racial and economic division between the central city and its surrounding suburbs. (See page 6a for more on segregation).

But school desegregation was just one of a cluster of issues – including affordable housing, public transportation, water quality, solid waste, and more – not effectively dealt with largely because of the fractured nature of metropolitan governance.

Early efforts toward metropolitan governance, such as the consolidation of the City of Nashville and Davidson County, Tennessee in 1962, were met with vehement denunciations elsewhere as an "un-American" attack on local democratic government. But as the impacts of unchecked metropolitan expansion became more apparent in increased costs, functional duplication, and inefficiencies, interest in metropoli-

tan government increased.

The formation of metro governments in places like Nashville, Indianapolis, Miami, and Toronto, however, is still the exception rather than the rule. The need to address the failure of effective metropolitan governance remains high on the list of America's challenges as we enter the new millennium.



4 THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE OF HIGH TECH HOUSING

The nation's most promising effort in high tech housing – as well as its most abject failure, was the Lustron House. Designed in 1946 by architects Morris Beckman and Roy Blass – and financed with a \$15.5 million dollar loan from the federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation – the Lustron House was conceived by engineer Carl Strandlund as a low-cost, “high tech” response to the housing needs of returning GI's. Components of the all-steel, porcelain enamel paneled ranch style house would be delivered by truck.

Unfortunately, the Lustron Corporation encountered significant early production problems, and after only about 2,500 units were delivered, declared bankruptcy. It left the federal government with the largest loss ever taken on a housing program. Interestingly, the remaining Lustrons are today prized by their owners for their thoughtful design and easy maintenance.

Tiled Time Capsules

American housing remains a modified custom-design on-site construction system constrained by 1920s era definitions of housing, antiquated building and zoning codes, and a tax system that encourages communities to exclude less expensive housing. What is still needed is a factory-molded basic unit along the lines of what Lustron sought to achieve in the 1940s, with plug-on elements permitting expansion or retraction as family needs change, designed to be organized into attractive higher density neighborhoods capable of service by public transit. Such a system could well replace the poorly constructed low-density deteriorating neighborhoods that ring our central cities and bring home ownership to a larger segment of Americans.

Tiled Time Capsules

by Beth W. Orenstein

Thomas Kotch and Wendy Glottke were graduate students in Binghamton, N.Y., when they first saw houses from the late 1940s and early '50s made entirely of porcelain and steel. “There were two side-by-side, one salmon-colored and one blue,” recalled Kotch, now a chemistry professor at Muhlenberg College. Every



Porcelain enamel finished panels covered the Lustron's exterior. This Lustron found a home in Closter, New Jersey.

time they passed the metal homes, which looked as though they were made of giant tiles, “we would laugh and wonder, ‘Who would live in a house like that?’”

At the end of this month, they will be the answer to their own question.

Kotch and Glottke, director of the newly formed forensic science program at Cedar Crest College, are buying a dove-gray tile house at the corner of 22nd and Washington streets in West Allentown.

About 2,500 such dwellings were built in 35 states east of the Rockies between 1948 and 1951. Made by the Lustron Corp., the residences were supposed to be the answer to the nation's need for inexpensive, quick-to-build housing as tens of thousands of GI's returned home from World War II.

Daniel Joseph, the Allentown Realtor who sold Kotch and Glottke their home, calls the Lustron “the Edsel of the housing industry,” after the Ford Motor Company's marketing flop of the late '50s.

“I have to confess, but Wendy had no intention of buying the home when she called and asked about it,” said Kotch. “She just wanted to see the inside.” Once inside, however, she fell in love. And so

the couple, who believe in resource management and recycling, began to investigate. The Lustron, Glottke said, “is in keeping with longevity and minimal impact” on the environment that's important to her.

They learned that there's no official registry of Lustrons, but about 1,000 of the 2,498 that were built remain. The houses didn't fall down, Kotch said. In fact, they're quite durable – fireproof and termite-proof.

The houses came in several pastel colors – pink, tan, yellow, aqua, blue, green and gray. ... A two-bedroom Lustron with 1,025 square feet of space cost about \$7,000 in 1948, making it competitive with similarly sized wood-framed houses. However, cost overruns forced Strandlund to raise the price to \$11,000 soon after they started coming off the assembly lines.

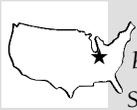
The houses, which have no duct work, also have a unique radiant panel heating system. Warm air, formed in a heating unit in the utility room, is circulated through a chamber that extends over the entire ceiling.

Joseph said the five-room residence appears small from the outside, “but its layout is quite nice.” The master bedroom is large – 12 by 12 feet – while the 10- by-14 foot second bedroom offers about the same floor space.

Kotch said he's always been impressed by the Lustron design. “There's no wasted space in a Lustron home. Just about everywhere you look is closet space.” ... The house came with built-in picture hooks because the only other way to hang anything on the walls is with magnets. The dwelling also has a lot of other built-in features, including a vanity in the master bedroom, shelf and serving space in the dining room, and bookshelves in the living room. All inside doors are “pocket doors,” which slide into and out of the wall.

Once they're settled, Kotch and Glottke plan to invite neighbors and friends to an open house and show off what they've done with their Lustron home. “We want to be known,” Kotch said, “as the people who put the lust back in the Lustron.”

Excerpted with permission of the author from an article that originally appeared in the June 13, 1999 issue of The Morning Call newspaper.



The Shaker Way

by Joyce G. Braverman

Shaker Heights, Ohio is a first-ring suburb of Cleveland with a population of 30,000. It is a diverse suburb racially (67% white, 31% black, 3% other) and ethnically, as well as in terms of housing prices. Our homes range from \$80,000 “starters” to \$1.5 million mansions. While planning policies dealing with yard signs and home loans helped to stem white flight, the primary factors to successful integration were and are the people and the neighborhood associations.

In the late 1950s, black families started to move into the Ludlow neighborhood. After some initial hesitation, black and white families began to meet and socialize with each other. The common concerns were falling real estate values and white flight. In the spring of 1957, many “for sale” signs sprouted up and down the streets.

The first significant planning policy that contributed to the community’s integration was the 1964 prohibition of “for sale” signs in yards; only small window signs were allowed. The ban remained in effect until 1995, when concerns over First Amendment issues caused the City to change this ordinance.

Beginning in 1961, one of the neighborhood associations began making short-term loans to prospective home buyers. Other neighborhood associations followed suit, using events, such as a 1966 concert featuring Ella Fitzgerald, to help raise funds. In 1985, the City created the Fund for the Future of Shaker Heights, offering revolving loans to assist white buyers moving into predominantly black neighborhoods, and black buyers moving into predominantly white neighborhoods. Over the years, these homebuyer incentive programs have helped to maintain integrated neighborhoods.

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5 THE LANDSCAPE OF RACIAL AND ECONOMIC SEGREGATION

In the early 1920s, and again in the 1930s under the New Deal, the prevalence of central city slums in America led idealists to seek solutions in the nearby countryside. Regional planners such as Lewis Mumford, Clarence Stein, and Benton MacKaye postulated that the return of people to “nature” in village-scale units, with its face-to-face social contact and mutuality of interests in neighborhood-scale social services such as schools, community centers, and parks, would humanize the public environment while lowering living costs.

The suburbanization of America, for all Americans – rich and poor – was viewed as a solution to problems of public health, social isolation, and poverty-maintaining high rents. Ironically, the vision of these early regional planners was stood on its head. Instead of leveling economic and class barriers, post World War II suburban development ended up strengthening them. Instead of providing for increased social contact and neighborhood-scale settings, isolated or gated enclaves placed new roadblocks between groups of people.

In many ways America was more

racially and economically segregated at the end of the century than when it began. In 1900 management and labor lived reasonably close together. Bosses commonly lived at the ends of blocks, closest to the trolley stops and on the widest streets. Laborers lived in the center of the same blocks in basement or attic flats, but walked the same streets and often shared the same conveyance.

Despite inspiring examples of consciously created socioeconomic integration, such as that attained by Shaker Heights, Ohio  *The Shaker Way*, the all too common American pattern since World War II has been one of suburban exclusion by race; of central cities with eighty percent or more “minority” population, many of whom are living in poverty; of failed integration of public schools; and of jobs moving to suburban locations that (for lack of public transportation) inner-city residents cannot reach.

6 DISINVESTMENT IN PUBLIC TRANSIT

Until the mid-1920s public transit was the primary means of travel between and within American cities. The trolley car, the interurban light rail, and the railroad structured the city. In the early 1940s



PHOTO BY KEN RESSETTE, UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT ARCHIVES

trolleys, buses, and commuter rail were still valued contributors to urban transportation. Trolley car and bus stops at the micro scale, and commuter rail stations at the macro scale, created centers of interchange that supported concentrations of commercial uses accessible to all.

But by 1945, after twelve years of depression and four years of war, the public transit systems of America were worn out, requiring billions in reinvestment if their services were to survive. America chose to disinvest in these services in favor of support for the private automobile and over-the-road trucking fleets. Trolley and bus systems failed, commuter lines were sharply curtailed. As Lewis Mumford put it, the American national flower became the cloverleaf intersection.

In the post war period, with reduced levels of public transit and a shift of commercial and industrial enterprises to highway intersections and outlying “greenfield” locations, the poor – who often could not afford to own and maintain a car – were left stuck in city centers.

Fulfillment of the promise of “the new urbanism” will depend on a new regional, if not national, commitment to public, pluralistic, socially equitable public transit systems.

A Great Celebration!

From the Burlington, Vermont, Free Press, August 5, 1929:

“The trolleys are no more in Burlington, Winooski and Essex Junction!

With Burlington’s streets decorated in holiday attire, two bands playing, camera men hustling about to get pictures and a crowd estimated all the way from 5,000 to 10,000 people looking on, an ancient trolley car was sacrificed in fire and smoke on Main street yesterday afternoon as the final ceremony which sent the trolley system into oblivion.”

Editor’s Note: As a postscript to this, last year the Metropolitan Planning Organization sponsored a study on the feasibility of restoring trolley (or “light rail”) service to the Burlington area!

7 DEFAULTING ON THE PROMISE OF PUBLIC HOUSING

Public housing in America was never intended to provide housing for the totally indigent. When the public housing idea was conceived in the early 1930s, such housing required the occupant to have a job, but with an income just below the level of free market access. Public housing was intended to provide a good environment in which to raise children and to permit the family to create savings, thus raising itself out of poverty and becoming capable of leaving for market rate housing after a short time in residence.

By mid-century it had become clear that public housing had defaulted on its original promise. Instead of serving as a short-term aid, public housing had taken on the characteristics of warehouses for the poor: great centers of destitution promising nothing but shelter from the elements at the price of loss of human dignity. By being consigned to inner-city locations, public housing kept the poor not only out of sight of the more affluent, but also far removed from the expanding number of suburban job opportunities.

What was perhaps even worse, the giant public housing towers common to many cities provided environments of fear, anger, crime, drugs, and despair. Public housing once was a promise of assistance toward a better life, a boost up the economic ladder, a decent place to raise a child, and a temporary haven followed by a valued entrance into a caring society. That program was aborted, contorted, and denied. Despite the glimmer of steps to rectify this situation, the problem of housing for the poor remains one of the foremost challenges facing Americans in general – and planners in particular.  *A Legacy of Failure*

A Legacy of Failure – Transformed?

Chicago’s massive high-rise public housing edifices are emblematic of the 1950s-70s approach to housing the poor. As the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) itself now acknowledges, for years it “failed in its mission to provide safe, affordable housing to the people of Chicago. ... Whole developments in CHA were vacant and boarded up – community eyesores, havens for illegal activity, and symbols of failure. Rival gangs took control of vacant buildings, creating free-fire zones between high-rises. ... Broken elevators were not fixed, garbage went uncollected, problems ignored and work orders piled up.” From “CHA In Transition” (1999).



BRIDGET MONTGOMERY, CHA

The recently completed Mohawk North townhouses reflect the Chicago Housing Authority’s decision to replace high-rise buildings with lower-density housing.

The CHA, with support from HUD, is now embarking on what it hopes will be a wholesale transformation. Included in CHA’s plans are \$85 million for the demolition of 51 high-rise buildings (nearly all its high-rises) containing some 16,000 housing units. At the same time, more than \$1 billion dollars will be spent on 25,000 new or rehabbed units on existing sites, such as the recently completed Mohawk North section of Cabrini-Green (shown above).

Chicago’s aggressive plans for demolition and replacement with new lower-density housing is consistent with the direction being taken at HUD through its “Hope VI” program. According to HUD, Hope VI is intended to “create mixed-income, affordable housing that is radically different from traditional public housing.” Since its inception in 1993 (and through September 1999) Hope VI has provided some \$168 million nationwide for the demolition of some 82,000 units of “severely distressed” public housing, and over \$3 billion in revitalization grants for rehab and new construction. While this amount sounds large, consider that Chicago alone is planning on well over \$1 billion in demolition, rehab and new construction during the next five years.

Time will tell whether Chicago’s – and the nation’s – new approach to public housing will transform a legacy of failure.

In a Land of Great Wealth

From the Inaugural Address of Lyndon Baines Johnson. January 20, 1965

On this occasion the oath I have taken before you and before God is not mine alone, but ours together. We are one nation and one people. Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen but upon all citizens. ...

They came here – the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened – to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind. And it binds us still. If we keep its terms we shall flourish.

Justice was the promise that all who made the journey would share in the fruits of the land.

In a land of great wealth, families must not live in hopeless poverty. In a land rich in harvest, children just must not go hungry. In a land of healing miracles, neighbors must not suffer and die untended. ...

Our Nation's course is abundantly clear. We aspire to nothing that belongs to others. We seek no dominion over our fellow man, but man's dominion over tyranny and misery.

But more is required. Men want to be part of a common enterprise, a cause greater than themselves. And each of us must find a way to advance the purpose of the Nation, thus finding new purpose for ourselves. Without this, we will simply become a nation of strangers. ...

I do not believe that the Great Society is the ordered, changeless, and sterile battalion of the ants. It is the excitement of becoming – always becoming, trying, probing, falling, resting, and trying again – but always trying and always gaining.

In each generation, with toil and tears, we have had to earn our heritage again. If we fail now then we will have forgotten in abundance what we learned in hardship: that democracy rests on faith, that freedom asks more than it gives, and the judgment of God is harshest on those who are most favored.

If we succeed it will not be because of what we have, but it will be because of what we are; not because of what we own, but rather because of what we believe.

8 ABANDONMENT OF THE QUEST FOR A "GREAT SOCIETY"

If government fails to support effective programs to provide quality housing, education, health care, jobs, and transportation for those the market economy chooses to ignore, then an equitable, just, and peace-seeking society must abolish poverty itself, raising up all of its citizens to be able to participate fully in the market-driven economy.

President Johnson's "War on Poverty" and his other Great Society programs intended just that: to provide social equity in a period of unprecedented prosperity – not only out of a sense of fair play and justice, but also to preclude future class conflict.  In a

Land of Great Wealth

The Vietnam War, with its enormous social, human, and economic costs, doomed Johnson's Great Society. Even the powerful American economic engine could not provide for both modern high tech warfare and the means of noticeably raising the standard of living of millions of its citizens. The end-of-the-war "peace bonus," touted as being capable of shifting what had been massive war-time military spending to social purposes proved to be a chimera, founded on the assumption that the more well-to-do would prefer a poverty-free society to continuing hefty military expenditures and enhanced personal tax cuts.

The prosperity of the late Reagan Era, bought at the price of a \$4 trillion national debt, left those in the bottom forty percent income range with less spending power than they had in the 1960s. For the less well-to-do – and for the urban areas in which they were increasingly concentrated – the legacy of the last decades of the twentieth century can be summed up as one of lost opportunities for eliminating poverty despite unprecedented national affluence.

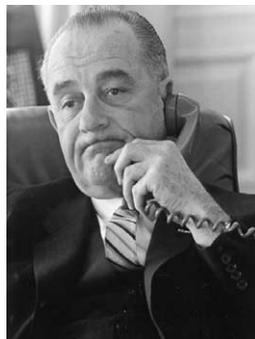
 *Homeless in America, p. 9a*

9 NARROWING THE MISSION OF HUD

At the end of World War II, President Truman proposed creation of a "Department of Urbiculture" to complement the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to represent and fulfill the needs of those Americans not directly engaged in farming. The idea failed to receive Congressional support. Later, President Kennedy proposed creation of a Department of Urban Affairs

and Housing to deal with the issues and aspirations of urban dwellers. This agency was finally approved in 1965, during the Johnson Administration, as the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

HUD, under its first Secretary, Robert C. Weaver, aggressively undertook pro-



Lyndon B. Johnson

grams to empower the urban poor (The Model Cities Program, 1966), to provide for urban development at the new town scale for a broad range of population by income and race (The New Communities Acts, 1968 and 1970), and to provide for high tech housing and the modernization of the American housing industry (Operation Breakthrough, 1968). But with inauguration of President Nixon, in 1969, and his unilateral termination of all federal housing programs in 1973, HUD as an agency for national urban innovation was emasculated.

In recent years HUD has undertaken some promising efforts, such as the Hope VI program intended to encourage local housing authorities to develop mixed income housing, with townhouse and garden style apartments instead of massive high-rises. However, HUD's current undertakings are still quite modest when compared to the 1960s vision for the agency – and to the need for a coordinated national effort aimed at meeting the housing needs of all Americans.



Outside 30th Street Station in Philadelphia

10 COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING CONSTRAINED

In 1915 Patrick Geddes cautioned against planning that was merely grounded in “material records” of past performance projected into the future as guides for development. Geddes believed that planning, if it was to fulfill its promise, had to focus creatively on the realization of community ideals.

American planning started the century with such ideal-grounded visions of the future city, as demonstrated by Daniel Burnham’s bold 1909 *Plan for Chicago* that captured the imagination of the city, and by the federal government’s intelligent planning and development of new towns during the First World War.

This early twentieth century view of the broad and creative role planning can play in a community’s (or even a nation’s) development was challenged by a much narrower, constrained conception, best encapsulated by the 1929 *Regional Plan of New York and its Environs*. This latter view of planning – which was largely to carry the day – was one in which data and its projection were coupled with a focus on just two aspects of development: transportation and recreation. Planning’s role was simple: find ways to facilitate projected regional growth.

In the early 1960s, in the prime of “Section 701” federally financed comprehensive planning programs, noted architect Albert Mayer echoed Patrick Geddes earlier words, cautioning that “trend is not destiny.” Mayer suggested that much planning at that time was “trending” that avoided hard decisions relative to the equity of the resulting communities and the quality of life being projected.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, the lure of universal access to vast data bases and the seemingly objective application of GIS-based data systems has subrogated questions of social equity and imaginative public action to the needs and outputs of what Geddes termed the “dry statistical record.” We now leave the twentieth century having fulfilled Geddes’ greatest fears. Data projection of “what will be” has assured its inevitability without fulfillment of the human and creative possibilities of what could be – and without answering the moral issues of what should be.

We enter the twenty-first century with urban and regional structures shaped, in large measure, by failures and lost opportunities. In 1890 Jacob Riis, in his landmark expose *How the Other Half Lives*, referred to “the harvest of tares,” the social weight that America would be required to carry into the twentieth century for its failure to deal effectively with the tenement house problems of the nineteenth. The legacy of our twentieth century failure to deal effectively with the inequalities of our society is the tare weight we carry into the new millennium. ♦

Laurence Gerckens, national historian for the American Institute of Certified Planners, founder of The Society for American City and Regional Planning History, and emeritus professor at The Ohio State University, teaches American urban planning history as an adjunct professor at Michigan State University, Kansas State University, and Goucher College, Baltimore. Gerckens has contributed a number of articles to the Planning Commissioners Journal.



Homeless in America

Families with children are among the fastest growing segments of the homeless population. In its 1998 survey of 30 American cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayors found that families comprised 38 percent of the homeless population.

A lack of affordable housing and the limited scale of housing assistance programs have contributed to the current housing crisis and to homelessness. Between 1973 and 1993, 2.2 million low-rent units disappeared from the market. These units were either abandoned, converted into condominiums or expensive apartments, or became unaffordable because of cost increases.

A housing trend with a particularly severe impact on homelessness is the loss of single room occupancy (SRO) housing. In the past, SRO housing served to house many poor individuals, including poor persons suffering from mental illness or substance abuse. From 1970 to the mid-1980s, an estimated one million SRO units were demolished.

A 1999 review of homelessness in fifty cities by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty found that in virtually every city, the city’s official estimated number of homeless people greatly exceeded the number of emergency shelter and transitional housing spaces. Moreover, there are few or no shelters in many rural areas of the United States, despite significant levels of homelessness.

Surveys also tend to undercount the number of homeless people because they are not in places researchers can easily find. This group of people, often referred to as “the unsheltered” or “hidden” homeless, frequently stay in automobiles, camp grounds, or other places that researchers cannot effectively search. For instance, a national study of formerly homeless people found that the most common places people who had been literally homeless stayed were vehicles (59.2 percent) and makeshift housing, such as tents, boxes, caves, or boxcars (24.6 percent).

The above information was provided by the National Coalition for the Homeless. For more information or fact sheets, contact Mary Ann Gleason, Executive Director, at 202-737-6444.