# HORIZON

JULY 1959

*From a debate among its friends and foes, new shapes are emerging for the city, humanity's "great place"*

# METROPOLIS REGAINED

*By* GRADY CLAY

Twenty years ago this summer the ideal city of tomorrow was available for anyone to see. It was the "Futurama," an elaborate scale model made by Norman Bel Geddes, which formed a part of the General Motors exhibition at the New York World's Fair. From a train of moving seats in the darkened building a visitor looked down, as though from the air, on a miniature landscape of highways and farm land—and finally on the City itself, with its quarter-mile-high towers sheathed in glass, and soaring among them the four-level, seven-lane, one-directional highways on which you would some day choose your speed: 50,75, or 100 miles an hour.

Then, as many will remember, there was the Voice, which softly and insinuatingly described the scene from a loudspeaker behind each seat. It is ironic now to recall what the Voice said: "The city of 1960 has abundant sunshine, fresh air, fine green parkways, recreational and civic centers—all the result of thoughtful planning and design." No building's shadow would touch another; parks would occupy one-third of the city area. "Who can say," whispered the Voice, "what new horizons lie before us if we but have the initiative and imagination to penetrate them . . . ?"

Coming out into daylight, the fairgoer of 1939 could only despair at the contrast between the city of the future and the city in which he himself was compelled to live. But we, one year away from the millennium prophesied for 1960, can feel a similar despair. The Bel Geddes dream has been coming true, in its way. But what a difference between the dream and its execution! The highways are being built, but at what cost to essential qualities of city life! The tall towers, gleaming with glass and steel, are rising above the streets of Manhattan—but they jostle one another like dominoes, shouldering their way up toward air and sun.

In retrospect the most ironic quality in the optimistic faith that Futurama City represented was the belief, as the Voice expressed it, in "thoughtful planning and design." That was a generation which at least thought it knew what was wanted, and assumed that the problem remaining was largely one of how to achieve it. Now we are not so sure. For twenty years we have been getting installments, admittedly small and disconnected ones, on the ideal city as visualized in the 1930's; and the more we get of it, the less certain we are that it is what we had in mind. The city of 1959—with its mile upon mile of circumferential suburbs, with its stark, efficient office buildings, and its sober, barren housing developments—this city of today is at least in some measure the end product of the dream of 1939, and we are far from wholly happy with it.

What we have learned, to our sorrow, is that the vision did not go far enough. For one thing, it looked down as though from a great distance, with the model-maker's eye, on the buildings in which flesh-and-blood humanity would eventually live; and it saw them, not to human scale, but to a scale designed—as one current critic puts it—"for a race of giant men playing a new kind of chess." Futurama's skyscrapers looked elegant enough only so long as you did not try to imagine them close up, in their inhabitants' dimension. For another thing, those marvelous one-way, multilane highways, carrying their many thousands in and out of the city, represented a theory of planning—and a system of social organization—which has turned out to be far less feasible than we thought. It might be called the Fallacy of Unilateral Dedensification.

This is the principle, in varying degree accepted by a generation of city planners, that the way to solve the problem of living in an urban society is to move people farther apart; the thing to do with the city is to get people out of it. The idea stems partly from old American tradition, partly

*Proud and passionate city . . . !*
*I have rejected nothing you offer'd me—whom you adopted I have adopted,*
*Good or bad I never question you—I love all—I do not condemn anything,*
*I chant and celebrate all that is yours. . . .*

—WALT WHITMAN, FROM *Leaves of Grass* (1865)

*Who designed New York? It was Cain, wasn't it . . . after he murdered Abel?*

—FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT (1956)

from the brief history of planning as an art. Both have combined to give an approved, deckle-edged authority to what an apparently preponderant number of Americans wanted to do anyhow—leave the city and live in the suburbs.

This mass migration, in volume, is one of the world's largest shifts of population, yet surely one does not go too far by observing that it has failed in what it set out to do. In 1905 the Central Railroad of New Jersey urged the head of a New York family, tied down to his city job, "to put as many leagues as possible between his home and the Tenderloin, to keep his wife and children apart from the contaminating sights and influences of the metropolis," and it guaranteed immunity from the "undesirable elements of city environment." Now, having put as much as forty miles between himself and his desk, the suburban New Yorker has become so numerous that he still crowds against his kind, out to the very farthest rings of stratified, bedroom communities which offer at best a veneer of the rural values. Suburbia promised open fields, then filled them up with houses. It spoke of peace and ended in zoning fights. Seeking the best of both city and country, the suburban pioneers have often found themselves saddled with the worst of each.

Meanwhile, back at the heart of the metropolis, the disease of Unilateral Dedensification has been working other ills. The city core, while no one paid much attention to it, has been moving into a stage of advanced decay. We have concentrated so hard on the desirability of getting out of the city that we have almost forgotten the values which have made cities the heart of every civilization. Only recently has the center of American metropolitan districts received anything like the attention that has gone to the fringe; and, now that planners and developers are turning to the job of renewing the downtown quarter, some of them are beginning to wonder if they may not have brought along the wrong tools. The theory that got us into this predicament, after all, is not likely to provide the best way out of it. Perhaps the greater need is for a new way of viewing the fact, the future, the bane, and the unique pleasures of city life.

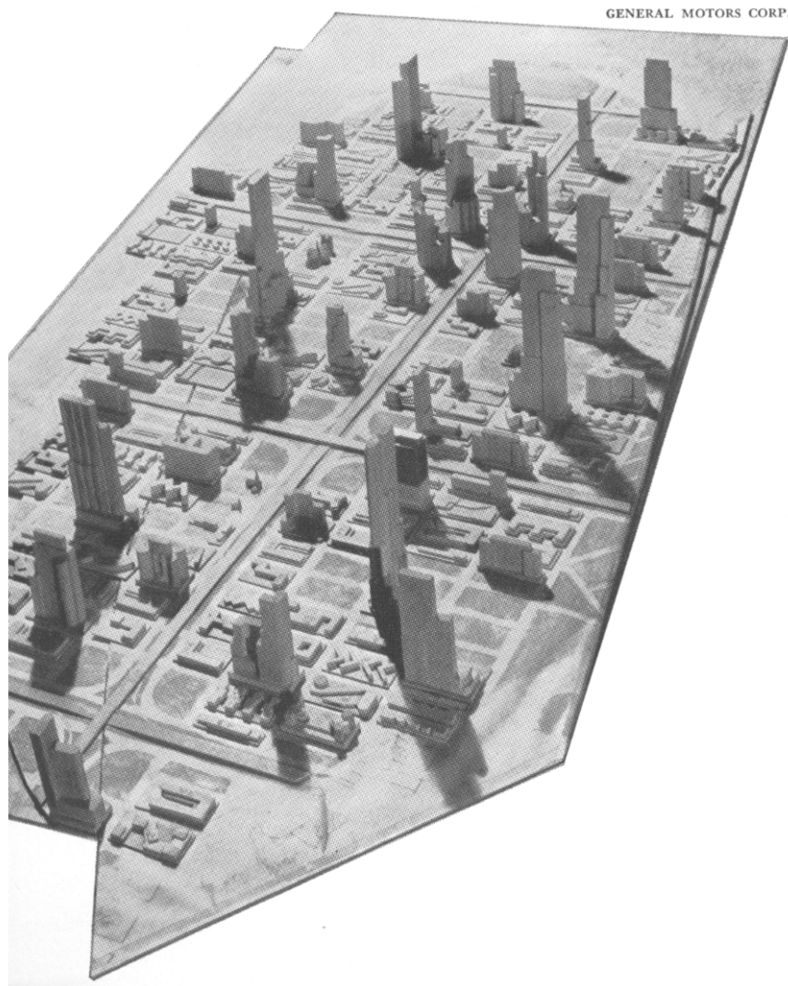
Our dilemmas have lately given rise to what can be called the Great Urban Debate. So far it has been limited mainly to city planners, to architects, to critics of both, and to journalists whose beat this subject is. These all are, virtually by definition, men and women with a common dedication to the traditional aim of city planning—the most agreeable, healthful, and practicable surroundings for the largest possible number of people. But recently they have been discovering, not without a certain sense of shock, that they are no longer talking about quite the same thing.

Some of the older generation of planners who look back on their handiwork, or on work committed in their name, have been heard to lament that somehow something has gone wrong, that the letter has been observed at the loss of the spirit. To this their critics have been known to reply, in effect: I-told-you-so—what did you expect to result from a rejection of the essential city virtues, the disorder and vitality so offensive to those who love neat plans, so welcomed by those who value cities for their own sake?

It may help to clarify a somewhat ill-defined debate if I exaggerate to the point of asserting that it is being conducted by two opposing sides. Let me call them, for convenience, the city-beat and the city-proud.

The city, in the view of the city-beat, is the stage-set for the death throes of civilization. It is the source of crime and false values, the playground of conspicuous-consumers. City life is frenzied, enervating, lacking in the quiet from which all great thought emerges. Here other-directed men work out their lives amid the conflicting pressures of increasingly powerful organizations over which they have decreasingly effective control. It is fruitless, so this reasoning runs, to talk of re-creating the intimate city of the Renaissance—or even the congenial squares and plazas like Venice's St. Mark's, where architecture and instinctive "planning" have combined to form a focal point of city life. We live in a new world, impelled by new forces, and soon new sources of energy will abolish the original necessity for urban concentration. The future lies outward, where man can begin anew in the clean and verdant countryside. The new

GENERAL MOTORS CORP.



*The city of the future as the 1930's saw it was epitomized by this section (left) from the General Motors "Futurama" at the New York World's Fair of 1939—a geometric arrangement of skyscrapers, park areas, and superhighways from which human frailty was removed.*

suburban man, commuting perhaps a hundred miles by helicopter, will be forever free of the city evils: envy, emulation, and conformity.

Such is the argument for abandoning the city to its fate. If this seems excessive, remember that the idea is embedded deep in American ideology and legislation. Here, for example, is Senator Homer Capehart, chairman of the Senate Banking and Currency Committee, commenting in 1954 on a bill to provide for families displaced by slum clearance:

"I think it is much better to build individual units for these people . . . let them live out in the country where they can get fresh air. . . . This provision has actually no merit at all, no virtue at all, unless it will take the people out of the slums and blighted areas, and give them an opportunity to own their own home. Get them out in the country, away from the city. If it doesn't do that, it has absolutely no merit."

The city-proud, on the other hand, are unwilling to accept this verdict. They believe that the city is—as it has always been—the hope of the world, the repository of all complicated and therefore civilized things. In the city, man has embodied his highest aspirations. It is his supreme artifact, a testimonial to his organizing skill, a treasure house from which he draws the rewards of genius. Here, in the eyes of the city-lover, is where great ideas flourish. Here the arts find their widest market, the professional and the entrepreneur their most rewarding clientele. Here the mind expands in the turbulence of the day, the companionship of the night, the challenge of other minds. City life is vivid, stimulating, productive. It offers all things to all men—including, when needed, the boon of anonymity. It is the source of innovation and enterprise, ever-changing, a symbol of life itself.

As can be well imagined, in these days of near-compulsory suburban migration, the city-proud are passionate advocates of what they believe to be a just but lonely cause. Perhaps for this reason, their most eloquent spokesmen have been found, not among city planners, but among sociologists, architectural critics, and journalists. Some of their most powerful statements can be found in an outspoken little book, *The Exploding Metropolis*, all of whose contributors were magazine editors and writers—the two most notable being Jane Jacobs, an associate editor of *Architectural Forum*, and William H. Whyte, Jr., of *Fortune*, whose book *The Organization Man* has set the style for so much viewing-with-alarm of the modern corporate colossi. After examining a variety of the grandiose city-redevelopment projects that are now under way in the United States, Mrs. Jacobs and her collaborators came to the conclusion that most of them were based on a complete misunderstanding of what has traditionally made great cities livable and attractive.

The new neighborhoods, she wrote, "will be spacious, parklike, and uncrowded. They will feature long green vistas. They will be stable and symmetrical and orderly . . . clean, impressive, monumental. They will have all the attributes of a well-kept, dignified cemetery. . . . These projects will not revitalize downtown; they will deaden it. . . . Almost without exception, the projects have one standard solution for every need: commerce, medicine, culture, government —whatever the activity, they take a part of the city's life, abstract it from the hustle and bustle of downtown, and set it like a self-sufficient island, in splendid isolation."

In England a parallel line of attack is being carried on by Gordon Cullen and Ian Nairn of *The Architectural Review*. In their special issues, bearing such titles as "Outrage" and "Counterattack," they have viewed with alarm the disappearance of both urban and rural Britain in a dreary, spreading "Subtopia." They prophesy that "if what is called development is allowed to multiply at the present rate, then by the end of the century, Great Britain will consist of isolated oases of preserved monuments in a desert of wire, concrete roads, cozy plots, and bungalows."

Planners on both sides of the Atlantic are appalled by cities that are expanding and disintegrating beyond all social or aesthetic sense. The urgency of the problem was stated recently by David A. Crane of the University of Pennsylvania:

"Since 1945, population of American cities has grown by more than 25 million, and during the next decade and a

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FAIRCHILD AERIAL SURVEYS, INC.

*The idea of a "garden city" inspired the building of Radburn, New Jersey, in the late 1920's. The residential town was planned to provide recreational areas, eliminate through traffic. But Radburn (outlined in white) is now engulfed by sprawling, unplanned suburbia.*

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half, 50 million more can be expected. . . . So far most new development or material improvement has been done on the urban fringes, leaving the older city cores to rot. We can expect our massive energies to be turned with equal efficiency to central area development. [But] if it is like what we have seen in fringe development, this is likely to be the final catastrophe. . . . What Americans have prodigiously produced is by common consent antiseptic, dull and meaningless at best, and at worst garish, pretentious, and inhuman. . . . If the values and achievements of civilizations are recorded in their cities, we shall certainly leave damaging symbols of ours."

The Fallacy of Unilateral Dedensification bears an important responsibility for bringing us to this pass. We have been misled by the notion that the only thing to do with the city is to turn it into something that is not a city at all, but rather a sort of denatured substitute from which the vital and interesting features, bad and good alike, have been removed. The flight from the city, both in fact and in fancy, dominates our thinking. The fact is that getting out, getting away, is one of the prime themes of the American experience.

Historically speaking, when we think of charming urban models we think of the surviving remnants of those middle-sized eighteenth-century cities from which our history took flight: Savannah, Charleston ("before the rich Yankees took it over"), or the numerous localities in the Western Reserve which grew gracefully into the role of birthplaces for so many presidents. These were the communities where you "knew everybody in town," where children could grow up exposed to rich and poor, the great and the phony. But with the appearance of industry on the rivers and the arrival of Europe's immigrants it was not long before this dreamlike landscape began to change.

Within a century (or a decade, in some places) the factories had covered the riverbanks where local boys used to catch their catfish; the city creeks had dried up, the fields had vanished under houses and warehouses, the woodlands close at hand were gone; by the time the bicycle arrived it was a good hour's pedaling for city youngsters to the nearest hunting ground or crawfish creek. Here and there, preserved by plutocracy (the rich suburbs and the Newports) or by poverty (Annapolis, Natchez, Nantucket), some towns managed to remain relatively untouched by time, to survive into the present and become case histories. But in the main the old scenes disappeared; and what the Industrial Revolution did not destroy, the Transportation Revolution did.

In 1841 a Reverend G. Lewis, minister in Dundee, Scotland, made a prophetic observation which could have been applied to any growing American city of the same period: "The newly opened railways," he said, "offer new facilities for uniting the business of the town with family residence in the country, and threaten, ere many years, to convert Dundee into one great workshop, with the families of its workmen wholly detached from the notice or sympathy of the families of any upper class."

Clear-sighted as he was, the good Dr. Lewis could not have reckoned with the strength of the frontier tradition in the United States, which extended his somber prospect beyond his most somber expectation. Spurred on by the hope (and often the certainty) of riches Out West, millions of Americans quit the old cities and struck out on their own —the greatest group of land speculators in our history. It is hardly too much to say, as did Secretary of State Seward, that for a century "the interested cupidity of the pioneer" was national policy. There was an easy buck to be had out where the grass grew tall or, if not there, on the city's edge. "Buy on the fringes and wait," said old John Jacob Astor.

Self-interest thus combined with the rivalry between farm and market, the provinces and the metropolis, to embed a belief that "God made the Country, and Man made the City" ever more deeply into the American unconscious. To realize how vigorously this prejudice persists, we need only consider the words of the late Frank Lloyd Wright, in his famous television debate with the real-estate magnate William Zeckendorf in 1956:

"Who designed New York? It was Cain, wasn't it? Cain was the founder of the city, after he murdered Abel. He had incurred the displeasure of the Lord, and he went out and

GERALD RATTO

*San Francisco's Maiden Lane, formerly a dingy alley, has been converted into an exemplary demonstration of the city virtues—a short, tree-lined street with varied shops and an intimate feeling.*

founded the city and here it is, yet. Here is the city founded by the man who murdered his brother, and he is still murdering his brother, isn't he?"

Rural parochialism of this stripe is not confined to yokels or to men of such strong opinions as Wright. Indeed it has a venerable lineage. Did not Thomas Jefferson say, "I view great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health, and the liberties of man"? Perhaps some modern critics would be willing to argue that Jefferson, in slicing off the top of a Virginia hilltop to provide a platform for his Monticello, was committing a flagrant case of early American "outrage," but he himself is still revered too highly to be much attacked for his antipathetic views on the city.

But strong support for the Fallacy of Unilateral Dedensification has come not only from these underlying ideas but from the theory of city planning itself. Reducing the concentration of people in a city—as the great English reformer Sir Ebenezer Howard wanted to do with London—is one of the most hallowed principles of planning. The trouble is that what Howard tried to do is a very different thing from what has since been done with his ideas. His solution, the English "Garden Cities" of the early twentieth century, did not exhibit that single-minded concentration on moving people out into the country which has characterized American endeavors. Howard did not want towns that would be merely dormitory parasites on the major centers, but self-sufficient communities that would be new (and improved) cities in themselves, smaller and more manageable than the London—"the great wen," as Cobbett had called it—of his day.

What Howard was after, and what he achieved in the garden cities of Welwyn and Letchworth, was to combine "the advantages of the most energetic and active town life with all the beauty and delight of the country." He neither believed that one must suffer indefinitely in the city crush, nor that solace and comfort were obtainable only in the wilderness. His object was to build well-financed, fully organized new towns, each with its own central core, thinly settled residential district, and ring of factories and warehouses. All would be surrounded by a strip of permanent agricultural land, to supply fresh produce to the townspeople. This was his "green-belt"—a name that later acquired meaning of its own in America—land which would not lie idle, but would produce both food and rent, not to speak of fresh air and recreation. Owned by the city itself, the green-belt would remain inviolate—a lasting, encircling stretch of amenity.

Howard's great book—originally titled *Tomorrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898), but later changed to *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*—is now required reading in the urban planning schools of the Western world, and has shaped the thoughts of two generations of planners, architects, land developers, and legislators. But his ideas suffered a sea change when they were imported into the United States. Certain details—green fields within residential blocks, walkways which connect homes and schools without crossing streets—showed up in the New Deal's famous Greenbelt towns, and in isolated examples like TVA's Norris, Tennessee. John Nolen, with his designs for Mariemont, Ohio, and Kingsport, Tennessee, helped encourage American enterprise in this direction, as did the better-known team of Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. Yet the latters' Radburn, New Jersey, built at the end of the 1920's as a "town for the motor age," offered the humane, green-grass qualities that Howard had been after, only in a dilute, suburban form—and Radburn, far from being surrounded by a protective belt, has now been swallowed up in the all-inclusive New York urban sprawl.

The green-belt itself, in the process, was sentimentalized into something Howard could not have recognized. Where he had intended it to have a positive function, both aesthetic and economic, the New Deal Greenbelt towns converted it into a protective barrier—in typically suburban fashion—against commerce and vulgarity. "Each town," read a Resettlement Administration press release on the occasion of President Roosevelt's visit to Greenbelt, Maryland, in 1936, "is surrounded with an area of woods and farm land which will protect the town from undesirable commercial

ROCKEFELLER CENTER, I

*In summer and winter alike Rockefeller Center's lower plaza serves as New York City's village green, a focal point of the city's activity at which the onlooker can always find some refreshing visual delight.*

*Some of the elaborate new shopping centers offer a new response to the human need for centers of social intercourse. This is the indoor sidewalk café at Southdale, near Minneapolis.*

or industrial developments." And, one might have added, from jobs.

In any event, these conscious efforts to "plan" new towns were the exception. The vast majority of American attempts to make a "garden city" followed the example of our first recorded community with that name, a Long Island suburb designed in the middle of the nineteenth century by Alexander T. Stewart. It had nearly 8,000 acres (nearly twice the size of Howard's Welwyn) and—what was more important—a railroad connection to New York City. Like Riverside, near Chicago—a "naturalistic subdivision" of winding streets and greenery, laid out in 1869 by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux—this was little more than a speculative residential project, tied to the city by the umbilical cord of a commuters' railroad. And these two, rather than the self-sufficient garden cities of England, proved to be the forerunners of today's mammoth suburbia.

From the beginning, the American green-belt towns were dominated by the old homestead idea: every man should have his own piece of land to "develop" as a garden. The somewhat more pressing question of where Everyman was to earn a living was grandly ignored. Greenbelt in this respect was no more than a small-town version of Futurama where, to the delight of General Motors, everyone would have to drive to the distant metropolis—at 75 miles an hour—to find work. Clarence Stein himself, a guiding force in American town planning, now sees that this was a mistake. Looking back on the three Greenbelt communities that were built (in Maryland, Ohio, and Wisconsin), he writes in his book, *Toward New Towns for America:* "Although these three are among America's outstanding demonstrations of New Towns, it must be admitted that they all missed out on the score of industry."

There was to have been a fourth—Greenbrook, New Jersey, "a complete garden city"—that did call for an industrial district. But local opposition and the threat of court action prevented it from being built. Subsequently, this region of New Jersey has had a tremendous industrial boom, one in which "Greenbrook" would undoubtedly have shared. Thus were we deprived of our one opportunity to find out whether the Howard idea, properly tested, could have taken root in America—and so we were left with nothing to go on but pale and irrelevant imitations, and with the rampant and overarching example of unleashed suburbia everywhere upon us.

So much for the background of our dilemma. For myself, after some extended tours through the mid-sections of a dozen American cities—and the urban planning offices in many of them—I can only say that all great movements start in murmurs, and that I hear murmurs. It is one thing for the city-proud, most of them New Yorkers, to defend their private vision of that many-faced goddess's charm; it is quite another for the inhabitants of equally chaotic but less dramatic cities to adopt similar views. Yet that is what

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUY GILLETTE · LENSGROUP

*Southdale's court—through the use of light, color, variety, cheerfulness, and bustle—seeks to have the qualities of a city in miniature, with heartening (if incomplete) success.*

I find—widening rings of curiosity about what can be done to save, to know, to appreciate, and to improve the city as the great place in its historic sense. These New Urbanists are not so much partisans in the Great Debate as products of it, and they might reason somewhat as follows:

We believe in the city, they would say, not in tearing it down. We like open space, but hold that too much of it is just as bad as too little. We want that multiplicity of choice which the city has always offered, but is now in danger of losing. We want the same financing for a city house as for a suburban split-level; good transportation to and from work, without wasting hours on subways, buses, or in traffic. We like the intimacy of the crowd, but we like also to escape from it—we like the busy downtown plaza, but also the pleasant walkways of a residential district. We are appalled at your civic centers, your housing projects, and your expressways. They seem designed to be self-contained mechanisms for performance, procreation, and propulsion. We come to the city seeking community, pleasure, jobs, and other people; you seem to be destroying the first, demoralizing the second, decentralizing the third, and displacing the last. *We like it here*—only give us a break!

The New Urbanists do not, I think, consider city planners to be the villains, for as a group planners could hardly be held responsible for even a modest portion of our urban ailments. The professional planner in America is still a small-time operator; he gets little encouragement and less status; and, when the municipal pecking order is established at city hall, he usually winds up far down the line with the assistant traffic engineers. Unlike his British counterpart, the American planner seems fated to assume the gentle role of umpire, often on the sidelines, and can expect to be rewarded with an occasional barrage of pop bottles in the form of budget cuts.

Nor do the New Urbanists believe that the answer is to give planners unlimited authority—over zoning, the design of buildings, the flow of traffic, the countless trivial obstacles that get in the way of all administration. They do not believe that change will be meaningful unless it comes about in the public mind. They would like to see a more critical audience for proposed urban plans, a more general acceptance of responsibility for what shape the city takes, a more sympathetic regard for its undeveloped potentialities. They welcome the scattered example of cities that have gone ahead on their own—as San Francisco has done with Maiden Lane, or as Fort Worth proposes to do—to restore the human dimension in the downtown core; and they look with hope, if with some skepticism, on the attempts to make new shopping centers into more reasonable facsimiles of a community meeting place—a place for talk, for random encounters, for passing the time of day.

They would like to see the construction of city highways brought down to human scale, so that the city is not made uninhabitable merely in order to make it accessible. They

would like to see some better way of clearing slums without bulldozer tactics, of preserving and emphasizing historical landmarks as focal points, and if possible of creating those visual backwaters and out-of-the-way corners that give any neighborhood its character.

They would like easier opportunities for all kinds of people to meet, more coming-together places, where strangers can gather casually without an introduction or a ticket —places with some of the qualities of the men's clubs of the nineteenth century, where you can expect to be received even if you do not know anyone there. They would like, in other words, more ways of substituting a face-to-face society for a bumper-to-bumper society.

They would like, though they hardly expect to see it, an official sanction for variety and experiment. As it is, the smallest proposal for change must do battle against the massed forces of inertia and practicality. There is also a wasted interval of silence between a proposal, let us say, for a new highway ("It's just on paper, way off in the future, so you needn't be concerned.") and the moment when a hearing is held and the stupefied public discovers that heavy commitments have been made and no comments are welcome. As a result, neighborhood associations come together spontaneously only on a crisis basis—to prevent somebody from doing something, like destroying a playground or tearing down an admired building. This is all exactly the opposite of what there should be, which is some sort of permanent organization solely intended to help people wind their way through the mysterious complexities of city government—a "city agent," perhaps, just as we have always had farm agents to do the same for rural people.

All these ideas of the New Urbanists spring from their conviction that the city can be saved, but not by denying its nature. The city, they believe, generates innumerable devices for ameliorating the human lot, and we would do well to study these—even where at first glance they look disorderly and disreputable—before abandoning them. Cities have been around too long for our generation to desert them so precipitously. As that admirable humanist Leon Battista Alberti put it in his *Deiciarchia*, "The necessary things are those without which you cannot well pursue life. And as we see, man, from his emergence into this light to his last end, has always found it necessary to turn to others for help. But then cities were created for no other reason than for men to live together in comfort and contentment."

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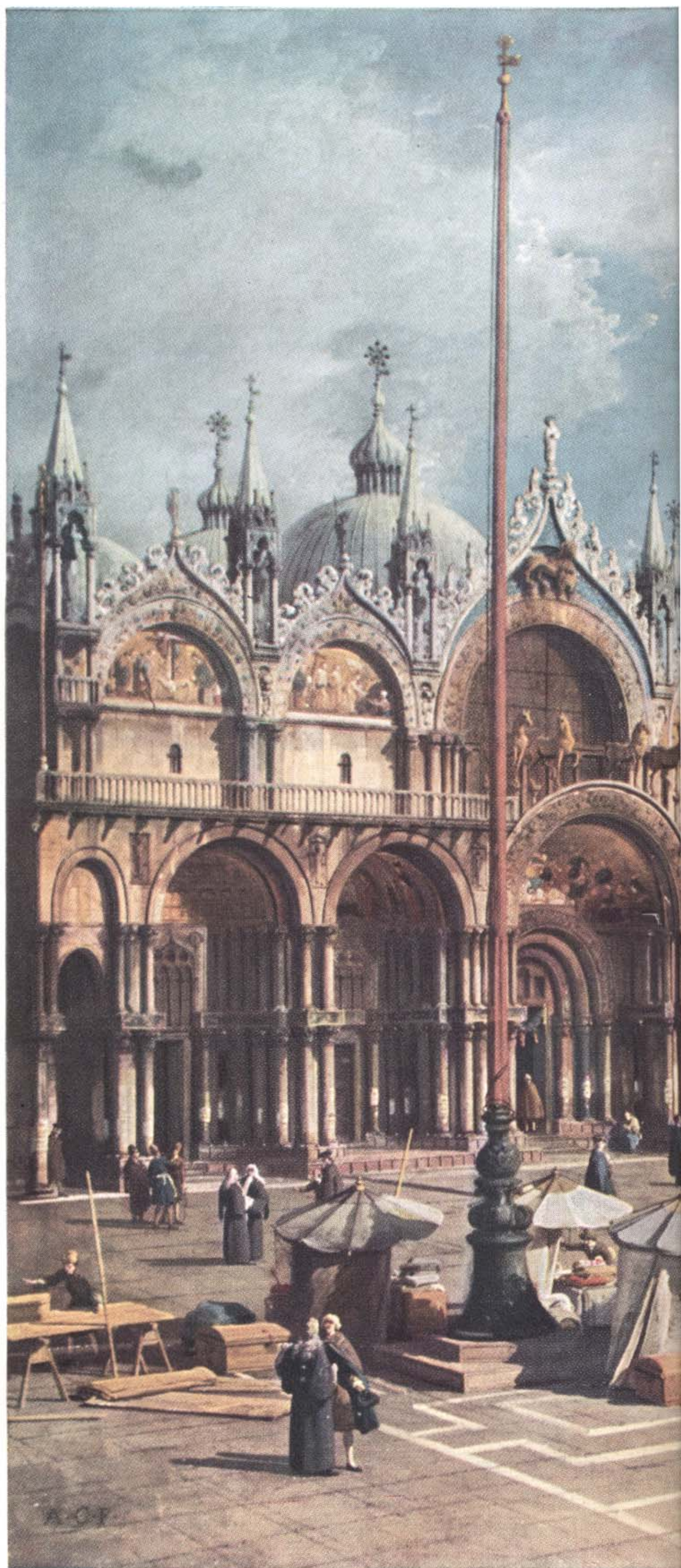

NATIONAL GALLERY, WASHINGTON, D. C. (GIFT OF MRS. BARBARA HUTTON)

*The goal of the New Urbanists has been best achieved in the past in such models of urban amenity as* The Square of St. Mark's *in Venice, shown above as Canaletto painted it around 1740. For centuries the square has served its city as a background for processions, celebrations, and casual conversations. Napoleon called it "the best drawing room in Europe."*