Conservation of Urban Open Space

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The city stands as testimony to man's judgment and rationality. It is his attempt to create an environment for living that is more fitted to his demands than that which nature provides by mere chance. In creating that environment, which we have come to distinguish as urban, the elements of buildings, roadways, and people are assembled in a variety of patterns occupying terrestrial space. Professor Hartshorne has stated

the work of the geographer to be "the scientific description of how originally unorganized areas of the earth are organized into various kinds of functioning regions."[1] No geographer can fail to be aware of the current pace of spatial organization via urbanization.

The urban geographer has examined the situational distribution of man-made landscapes in global space, *i.e.* the relationship of cement and steel construction to tectonic and edaphic features. He has also studied the symbiotic nature of cities and the functional forces that maintain that kinship. As cities expand in size, as well as number, the student of urban growth is compelled to take especially careful note of site space. Site space is not merely the nebulous peripheral room for expansion mandatory to the modern urban agglomeration. It is most vitally the internal open space that, like pores, permits movement and the entrance of light and air.

Historically, this internal urban open space was synonymous with the market square. It was a congestion of booths designed for pedestrian traffic that existed as a walled appendage to the main street. With the advent of motorized traffic and greater population numbers, cities were built and rebuilt on the scale demanded for business and residence. The square became an open hub into which streets converged and around which traffic was sorted. Aside from this eminently functional square, rarely were open spaces purposefully platted into the city's design. Ineptly planned street patterns sometimes left wedges of green (or mud) between blocks or roadways. Infrequently narrow buffer zones were retained around residences because they added dollar value to the property.

With the industrial revolution the city truly became a habitat for men. For now a man no longer went out to surrounding fields to work with the land during the day. He worked in the same kind of man-made structures that he had built to house himself at night. The resultant compartmentalization of urban dwellers made observers quick to assert that the city was a destroyer of nature, a predator whose ultimate victim was man. The intellectual elite fled to forests and ponds and clucked like old hens as they watched Boston make men "artificial," Chicago grow into a "jungle," and London become a warning of what "Hell" was like.[2] Those who quit the city and prepared to watch the buildings crumble and fall were to see their words on paper only. Now men who were producers, as well as verbalizers, had a freedom in which to work. The pragmatic urbanist criticized the city, but out of a concern for the future growth of modern civilization, not from a disposition to attack it in the name of tradition and nature.

As the twentieth-century city planner set about the task of building cities that were living and livable, each of the basic elements was thoroughly examined. A new architecture designed buildings to make the most efficient use of steel and the new stronger, but lighter, construction materials. Streets were widened for quick but safe passage by automobile. Urban sociologists tried to give people a new understanding of their personal worth and their vital importance to the total functioning of the city. It was in the course of this self-examination that city builders became acutely aware of the rigidity of their urban habitat—the solidness of walls that had been constructed with no windows. And, as steel and reenforced concrete permitted light and air into the 60th story of skyscrapers, so the city's horizontal floor plan, surer of its inherent strength and resiliency, opened up to let in light and air.

In 1904 Ebeneezer Howard built Letchworth, a new town north of London. By skillfully intertwining green open spaces and man-made structures, Howard created a city in a garden—not a retreat from but a flowering of industrial and residential integration. The green belt that surrounded Letchworth and the internal parks that dotted its basic plan

were soon copied on the Continent and in the United States. In 1928, Radburn, New Jersey, the first United States town built on the Letchworth plan, introduced the "super-block" into American city planning. Residences rubbed shoulders as they lined the edge of an over-sized city block, but all buildings faced inward to an open park. Streets passed only the back doors of houses. The Greenbelt towns of the 1930's were a further manifestation of the growing willingness to reserve some internal space to the sole function of being open.

Since World War II suburbanization has spread across the United States at the rate of one million acres a year.[3] More potently than could ever be imagined in 1890 the American has become aware of the disappearance of a frontier. By virtue of scarcity, open space, *per se*, has become a resource to be conserved. The urban geographer's attention has been captivated by this speculative series of Levittowns, and it has taken blatant decadence and street rioting to remind him of the continuing importance of site space.

Being against urban open space is like being against American motherhood, but, unfortunately, productive support is not nearly so easy to effect. In a 1916 city-planning book the author[4] warned against the too free use of open spaces in the city's central business district because they might serve as a "rendezvous for loafers" and so lose "much of the charm they naturally have."[4] In 1967, a far more real threat to urban open space than loafers is the demand by other uses on commercially valuable land. Urban open space is not intended to be simply vacant land awaiting commercial utilization. It is permanently reserved land upon which building is prohibited, and to which some noncommercial function is assigned.

This noncommercial function might be recreation, such as a city park. Almost every city of any size has a park for the leisure and enjoyment of its citizens. Tulsa, Oklahoma, maintains more than 80 city parks, included in which is a 24-acre rose garden. Chicago's Grant Park gives the city a beautifully manicured front yard. In addition to the 700 acres of Central Park, New York City has purchased several small parcels of land the size of a building lot or less. These "vest-pocket" parks have been outfitted with young trees, hardy shrubs, and seasonal flowers. Though the small spot of green is often turned into a pigeon-guano island, the basic motive of the park is not to be discounted.

The green areas of a city may also serve to direct and shape future urban expansion. Madison, Wisconsin, has had a greenway concept, incorporating lakes Mendota and Menona, as the focal point of its comprehensive plan since 1900. Dallas, Texas, has recently mapped out a greenbelt following natural drainage patterns to beautify the city's rough edges. In Tulsa, green wedges follow drainage routes into the core of the city and act as buffer zones between the central city and the suburbs. Municipal authorities in San Francisco, California, are attempting to use open space to shape the vertical as well as the horizontal plan of the city. In a zoning ordinance pending approval in 1967, office buildings in the central business district that leave a street level plaza or pedestrian walking area would be permitted to build as high as 60 stories. If the firm insisted on using all of the ground space of its lot, the height of the building would be restricted to 15 stories.[5]

Urban open space may also be set aside for the subsequent conservation of some other natural feature contained therein. This secondary conservation is necessarily dependent upon local site features, and it is directed at the preservation of distinctive geologic, botanic, historic, and scenic areas; protection of the ecological balance of an area; and wise use of river valleys, forests, soils, fish, and wildlife.[6] The means used to survey the conservable assets of an area are quite familiar to the geographer:

aerial photographs, United States Geological Survey maps, Soil Conservation Service surveys, and privately prepared commercial maps. The supplementation and corroboration of these paper surveys with field work is a task well suited to any trained geographer.

As the urban geographer studies the balance of rural and urban areas in global space, so he should not neglect the balance of man and nature within the city. The urbanite has not spurned nature as extraneous or superfluous. Rather, he is just learning to blend the long familiar aspects of nature with the new materials of his own making, and he is beginning to achieve what was always his ultimate goal—an ordered, habitable environment.

FOOTNOTES

1. Richard Hartshorne. 1960. Political geography in the modern world. *J. Conflict Resolution.* 4(1):53.

2. A complete examination of this theme may be found in Morton White and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus The City,* Mentor, New York, 1964.
   For further reading in a more contemporary setting Edward Higbee, *The Squeeze: Cities Without Space.* William Morros, New York, 1960, is very highly recommended.

3. *Open Space for Urban America.* Urban Renewal Administration, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, 1965, p. 1.

4. Charles Mulford Robinson, *City Planning,* G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1916, p. 192.

5. "Must Cities Give Way to Glass Boxes," *Wall Street Journal,* June 21, 1967.

6. *Preserving Urban Open Space,* Urban Renewal Administration, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, February, 1965, p. 8.