

INFORMATION

ENVIRONMENT

ENVIRONMENT PROBLEMS AND CITY CENTRES (*)

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Introduction

Nobody can have failed to notice the drastic changes of the past 30 years in the layout of our cities, and the growing importance of big office buildings and shops to the detriment of housing in the town centre. Equally noticeable, too, is the almost permanent congestion of traffic, the gradual disappearance of quiet streets and the familiar forms of local life, not to mention the parks, the gardens, small shops, the odd-job man and all the diversity which used to be the attraction of town life.

In the "Mens en Ruimte" report, commissioned by the European Commission, it is argued that these changes are due to economic progress and the resulting expansion of the "tertiary sector" resulting in a major increase in office requirements. Within any given area, office buildings have taken precedence over the other functions of city centres. The characteristics of former days -- the housing, the small shops, the artisan and the odd-job man and all the rest -- have been thrust out into the suburbs, or are subsisting under the threat of total disappearance.

Moreover, the massive use of the private car has provoked an astounding extension in the space -- in the form of urban motorways, parking lots and the rest -- which must be set aside for traffic.

The effects have naturally been very important. Not only has the old atmosphere gone by the board, but we are less safe, we breathe a more polluted air, we must face bottlenecks, ugliness and other nuisances.

Governments and public authorities in EEC countries, finding themselves faced with this worsening of urban environment, have found it needful to take steps to maintain the balance between the economic objectives and the quality of life. Such intervention has necessarily run into serious difficulties in countries where the free enjoyment of property rights plays an important part. Moreover, it has been difficult to find a way round the rise in land prices in the areas concerned, expropriation is costly and time-consuming, and often the funds available for carrying out proposed plans prove to be inadequate.

It is nevertheless an interesting fact that people have become aware of the importance of safeguarding the environment in city centres and that in general, public opinion supports the efforts of the authorities in this direction.

History of the problem

What we now call "urban renovation" can be traced back to the beginnings of town life. It was mainly a matter of adapting the town centres to new requirements; and usually the existing structure of streets and squares was left intact.

Some of the official work served in fact as an instrument of political grandeur (e.g. in Berlin in the period of German unification) or of class policy (as in the "strategic embellishment" of Paris by Baron Haussmann). In the second world war many towns and buildings were destroyed by bombing and battle, and the chief preoccupation of town authorities was public health. France, for example, had its bidonvilles, and in Great Britain the housing conditions in industrial towns were regarded as unacceptable.

During the sixties many projects were put forward; but this was a period when people thought of the towns and cities mainly as administrative and commercial centres. Residential housing was regarded as having its place out of town, and the mobility induced by the popularity of motoring favoured "suburbanisation". This was the golden age of residential suburbs.

A turning-point was reached in 1965. It was at this time that governments and local authorities recognised the need for preserving the urban environment by mingling into the functions of economic growth, the older city functions which had previously flourished there. Since this time, there has been almost everywhere a movement to bring back the inhabitants, and thus give renewed life to city centres which had become deserted. The accent is also being put on the restoration and renewal of historic buildings and districts.

The public authorities of today are hoping to put a stop to the decline in city centres, by promoting the building of office blocks outside the centre, renewing the older residential housing, giving more thought to the conservation of historic buildings and areas, and improving existing commercial centres.

Among the EEC countries, Denmark has gone further than others in nature conservation and environmental improvement. This has enabled it to combine urban improvement with general environmental planning.

The Danish example

Danish legislation gives public authorities a wide choice of effective instruments. For example, the town-planning law (1925-38) lays down a basis for area planning. The urban and rural areas law of 1970 is an attempt to correct the unduly dispersed development of the towns. The original version of the slum clearance law of 1939 has been amended five times (1959-69-71-73 and 1975), and is now much more detailed and has a much bigger scope than similar legislation in other EEC countries. There is also a very strict law on the preservation of historic buildings (1918-1969) and on national and regional planning (1973) for urban development policy. In addition, an environment ministry was set up in 1972, with a mandate not only to supervise sources of pollution, but also to foster territorial development and safeguard the buildings and sites of the historic heritage.

Examples of urban renovation plans make it clear that the Danish procedure is by redeveloping one urban enclave after another. Projects on a large scale are very rare, chiefly because the authorities cannot afford them.

Other characteristics include avoidance of action which would destroy the original form and texture of the town, attempting rather, to conserve the existing structure and minimise any change of style and relative dimension between the old buildings and the new. Often the authorities prefer to give up the development of shops, offices and parking lots in the city centres, so as to favour residential building.

Moreover, the town improvements in Denmark are determined on social and economic lines after consulting the population concerned. At Helsingborg, for example, the inhabitants held a whole series of public meetings before they took responsibility for deciding that the shopping and service area should be extended through a new centre to be built for the purpose. This decision was taken for the sake of maintaining the historic character of the old city centre and preserving an environment of which the inhabitants were specially fond.

The city-centre problem

The first of the principal questions which must be dealt with by urban developers, is the "landscaping" which will have been considerably changed. The very rapid expansion in the building of office blocks has given quite a number of streets an entirely different look. Moreover,

there has been a great increase in the number of working population converging on the town and all about the same time; and this has necessarily led to the making of urban motorways, while many streets have had to be widened and there are a great number of garage-parkings. This is a world on four wheels, and even the footpaths are invaded by the cars. The pedestrian can but feel he is out of place.

Another factor is the abundance of high-rise buildings in so many towns. Skyscrapers of course are conveniently efficient for office workers, but there is also the underlying fact that they yield the promotor singularly well for every square meter of occupied ground.

The great demand for sites and the scanty space available has led to a jump in prices. One consequence is, that the owners of little shops, older offices and dwelling-houses are now outcasts from the property market, for such accommodation is far from economic and its owners are thus less competitive than of old, and incapable of paying the up-to-date prices. The change is resulting in the disappearance of the variagated character of the town, instead of which there are rows and rows of tall office buildings, all with only a single aim in life. Offices and offices again -- the wheel has turned full circle.

An example, almost a caricature, is the rue de la Loi in Brussels. This fine wide avenue leading into the city centre is now nothing more than an important urban motorway, lined solely with administrative buildings, insurance companies and banks. Once office hours are over, the monotonous activity of the day gives place to the empty desolation of night. Suffocation and disquiet weigh upon the atmosphere of rue de la Loi, and nobody would go there for a pleasure stroll.

The needs of the modern economy ...

It is worth enquiring why the office function has thus increased and multiplied. In every industrial country the same thing has happened. The tertiary sector and the service trades have usurped the former position of the private house and the manufacturer.

The office buildings put up between the wars were far from enough to meet the requirements of up-to-date economies, which habitually use an impressive number of people with the highest possible degree of centralisation.

Another reason lies in the increase during the last few decades in the international character of business. Big multinational firms build factories and operate services in a variety of countries, and it is no rarity to see them embarking on property investments for the sake of profitable operation. If we think of the case of a business man living in a country where office planning and development is under strict control. Will he not be tempted to invest in some neighbouring country where the town-planning legislation is more accommodating ?

This means that the imbalances of urban development are habitually "exported" from one country to another; for there is as yet, no all-round agreement to regulate how towns should develop.

... and the inhabitants

Thus it is, that in the city centre the number of residents is diminishing; and since those who remain are mostly the less wealthy ones, there is a shrinkage in the funds flowing into the kitty of the city treasurer. Local authorities facing higher costs for operating their services, tend to favour the outflow of this population to dwell in suburbia. There is a preference for using the land thus liberated for uses which produce a tax revenue -- i.e. shops and offices. This was the attitude which prevailed during the sixties, but it did not prevent public authorities from having to support single-handed the cost of the investments needed for their operations, the re-housing costs, transport development, provision for culture and amenities.

In this period, too, public administrations regarded it as uneconomic to grant subsidies for restoring old buildings. The prevailing concept was of "irredeemable slums" and whole districts were bulldozed out of existence (e.g. the Gare du Nord area in Brussels) and great office buildings erected in their stead.

It is only quite recently that the dwellers in specific areas have got together to record their protests against all this demolition (e.g. in Amsterdam, Brussels and Dublin). This has brought a gradual change in the governing attitudes to the destruction of housing accommodation.

... and the transport ?

Many of those who now live in the suburbs still come back into the city centres to work, so that there is a persistent increase in the number of commuters. They travel, indeed, not only from the suburb to

the centre, but also from one suburb to another. Saturation of facilities in the old town centre has in fact led to the setting up new shop and office centres in the area around the towns.

Public authorities, faced with these phenomena, are channelling their subsidies and investments mainly into road transport facilities between the suburbs and the centre, tending to neglect other means of transport and the expenditure in the centre itself.

... and the protection of historic buildings and sites ?

It is not only because insufficient money is provided for maintenance, that there is a steady dwindling of the historical and architectural heritage in European cities. It often happens that a street or square has a historical interest which the individual houses do not possess; and some of the buildings may then be demolished or modernised, destroying the unity of the whole. Elsewhere things have been known to happen the other way round. The buildings in a given area are scheduled as historic and not a thing may be changed. Often these buildings prove ill-adapted to modern life and this induces their owners to neglect them if repair subsidies are not forthcoming.

In addition, it is not enough to preserve the façade of a noteworthy building. It has to be brought to life by giving it a social existence, compatible with the requirements of today.

A state of chaos

Office blocks and traffic jams are not the only factors accounting for the state of chaos in many town centres. So often towns have lost all esthetic and architectural consistency, all diversity in their economic, social and cultural activities, much of the charm and bustle which was previously theirs. In actual fact, it would have been possible to integrate the new buildings with the old to create a pleasant and well-balanced whole. What has been lacking was primarily an overriding plan, a plan of ground utilisation, which would have brought the new construction under control, laying down limits to the invasion of new functions, and providing the transport facilities and the infrastructure which were needed.

Different approaches to the problem

Each type of town has its own set of problems. Mens en Ruimte seeks to make consideration of the question easier, by classifying different cities by reference to their functions and their physical characteristics -- always remembering that the functions of a town may change as time goes by, and that they have their influence on its physical aspects and vice versa.

Types of city centres :

- 1) Old and historical centres which have not been much changed, but are required to function as up-to-date city centres (e.g. Chester, Bruges, Middelburg, Venice, Roskilde, Florence).
- 2) Old city centres encircled by a more up-to-date centre and absorbed into it. (Rouen, Brussels, Antwerp, Milan, Hamburg, Munich, Copenhagen, Bonn).
- 3) City centres dating from the industrial age. The working-class and industrial districts are close to the centre and very old-fashioned. (Birmingham, Glasgow, Dortmund).
- 4) New towns which have become big. No well-defined functions as town centres. Modern structures (Aberdeen, Brest, Toronto, Wolfsburg).

In any town problems come to the surface when a new function or a new requirement is brought in. The response will depend on the type of town with which we are dealing.

Some towns have yielded to the pressure, demanding that they allow the office building function to make radical changes in what the centre of the town looks like (Brussels, London, Liverpool, Frankfurt). Elsewhere the preference has been for building the office area outside the old town (Paris, Utrecht, Hamburg, Essen, Rome).

For the shopping area, too, there are two possible attitudes. One is to set up new centres outside the old commercial quarter, and use them to serve the new residential areas. The other is to improve the shopping environment in the old city centres, by converting streets to be used by pedestrians only, building galleries and arcades and commercial centres and generally improving the esthetic impact (e.g. benches, seats, attractive lighting and similar improvements).

There is also the housing problem; but towns which have in recent years decided to encourage populations to move back into the city centre

(London, Edinburgh, Berlin, Toulouse, Copenhagen, Bologna, Ancona, Essen, Amsterdam) are faced with having to deal with a great number of old residences and high prices because of the site value; a population which is poor and advanced in age; and historical districts which may not be modified.

It is now desirable to survey the administrative and legal provisions used in the different countries to attain the ends they decide to seek.

Legal and administrative instruments

In the first place there is national or regional planning, such as subsists nowadays in half the countries which belong to the European Community. The plans lay down a specific approach and specify a number of requirements and directives. The effective impact of this planning on the way the towns develop varies with the extent to which the planning authority is centralised.

At the local level the instruments available to the towns for determining their own development are master plans, sector planning and special plans for specific areas and districts.

When the authorities take a hand in any project for redevelopment or ground reutilisation, the legal right they have at their disposal is expropriation. In some countries expropriation of land is made difficult, except for purposes of slum clearance (Denmark, Italy). In others definitions are on a wider basis; and in France any piece of land can be requisitioned provided the authorities have decided to introduce a plan for ground utilisation.

In some cases the practice is for public authorities to requisition a site and then to sell it to a private developer, who is required to conform to a plan laid down in advance. It seems, indeed, that the current trend is for public authorities and private firms to work together in carrying out the renewal projects.

Another method is for the government, without ever going so far as requisitioning the site, to invite the owner to take action required under a renewal plan. The right to do this exists in several countries and is used mainly for purposes of slum clearance.

In the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands, inexpensive houses are built by public bodies in lieu and place of the former slums. More often, however, the old buildings are acquired by the State for modernisation rather than demolition.

Another question which arises in urban development policy is the protection, restoration and improvement of buildings and areas of historical interest. A good solution is to schedule them as "protected areas", laying down plans and providing adequate funds to guarantee the future of the district. This is the best way of avoiding speculation by some of the owners, who may be hoping for the property to deteriorate to an extent which would justify removal from the schedule, which would set them free to sell sites, the potential prices of which have gone right outside the normal market.

Improving the environment

When public authorities desire to improve the roads, extend the space provided for pedestrians, develop public transport, lay out parks and squares, plant more trees and diminish the air pollution and noise pollution, there are two main weapons at their command. They can use the public funds available for operations of this type, and they can make a new regulation which will be suitable for what they are seeking to do.

It is obvious that environmental improvement in the towns calls for considerable funds. With the exception of Federal Germany, where the town administrations enjoy a high degree of autonomy, major expenditure problems always come up to the national level and the powers vested in the towns themselves are pro tanto diminished. It is the central government which subsidises the greater part of the functional costs, which is the biggest item in the town budgets. For this reason, it is noted in the Mens en Ruimte study, it is important that the improvement of city centres should be recognised as an urgent national project enjoying a high priority.

The rôle of international bodies

A number of interesting studies have been made by bodies such as the Council of Europe, the OECD, UNESCO, the International Union of local government bodies, the Council of European Municipalities and Europa Nostra. These have raised considerable thought and discussion on urban problems and facilitated the spreading of information. All the bodies concerned, however, are consultative and it is only their prestige that can bring their comments to the fore.

The only action to be taken is to provide financial support for specific projects. The financing by UNESCO of the restoration of Venice is a good example of this type of intervention.

Desirable lines of approach

The EEC is in a position in which it can exercise an influence on the town planning in member countries. For example, the Commission decisions on air pollution (exhaust gases, gasoline composition etc) are making their effects felt in the city centres.

For this reason, say the writers of the report, it is important that the Community should adopt a number of principles about the environment in city centres. The document proposes, for example :

- 1) Opposition to the demolition of old buildings in city centres which are structurally sound;
 - 2) Scheduling more protected areas and encouraging the renewal of old buildings;
 - 3) Elimination of the policies and other barriers preventing individuals at all income levels and ways of life from finding housing accommodation in the city centres;
 - 4) Elimination of all influences likely to encourage property owners to allow buildings to deteriorate and become slums;
 - 5) Exercise of strict control over all forms of urban development, more especially through obligative plans for ground utilisation and by sector planning;
 - 6) Consideration of town improvements as an obligation not only on public authorities, but also on private property owners;
 - 7) Coordination of new residential construction with the creation of means of transport as required;
 - 8) Development of plans to reduce motor traffic in the central areas ;
 - 9) Improvements in the quality of public transport;
 - 10) Ensuring that all sectors of the public take part in the planning process from the start.
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