Colonial Cities: Urban Planning in the Third World

Report of IDF meeting held 15 November 2000

Speaker:
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This was one of the most successful meetings in recent years, attracting not only members of the RTPI but also architects, engineers and other disciplines. The talk covered the whole sweep of British colonial urbanism, from the plantation of Ulster in the 17th century to de-colonisation after the Second World War. It covered small settlements that have since grown to be among the largest cities in the world. Dr Home demonstrated how colonial political and economic policies, as well as urban planning policies, have had a profound impact on the form and function of these cities. A particularly interesting feature of this period, was how the requirements and demands of these towns related to the rise of the planning profession. The ideas and plans produced a number of techniques and policies that we have inherited, including the Green Belt. A point that provoked discussion was the influence on colonial urban planning of local doctors and army engineers.

A major theme was how the transfer of the embryonic British urban planning system to the colonies occurred. The British Empire was at its zenith in the years between the two World Wars; precisely the period which saw the emergence of town and country planning as a professional activity in Britain. Theories, legislation and professional skills were exported, utilising a network of colonial relationships, to the dependant territories. This has resulted in most of the countries of the Commonwealth deriving their current urban planning systems from British practice and legislation.

A grid iron model for colonial town layouts quickly developed, based upon the practices of land surveyors, mainly from the Royal Engineers. There were, nevertheless, a number of influences that accounted for variations in approach, particularly differing climate and terrain, and historical and legal developments of colonial rule. From very early on Britain established its colonial presence, mainly in the coastal areas, by ceding or acquiring territory further inland. This was achieved via legal protectorates or indirect rule, leaving the traditional authority modified but intact. These arrangements affected the way in which town planning was exercised. It also had an affect on the symbolism of the urban form from the splendours of New Delhi to the more modest garden city of Lusaka. The influence of Howard's Garden City concept was noted.

Location of ports and routes of railways were of vital importance to controlling and administering the territories. Eight main attributes of colonial urban planning were established:

1. Deliberate urbanisation as a locus for civil behaviour and to establish control, e.g. Londonderry and Cork.

2. Towns were pre-planned and imposed on localities without much attention being given to existing constraints.
3. Grid iron layouts with streets, up to 150ft. (50m) wide were a special feature. As with Haussman in Paris this was to assist in civic control and surveillance, not for traffic purposes.

4. Public squares were provided for symbolic purposes, to emphasise the status of the Empire. They were also used for cricket as much as civic gatherings.

5. Towns were divided into 100ft. (30m) wide rectangular plots to minimise fire and health risks.

6. About one tenth of the area of the colonial town was laid out for public and sporting purposes, again with the emphasis on cricket.

7. A cordon sanitaire surrounded every town, about ¼ mile (400m) wide to separate the town from the surrounding bush or jungle, this width being regarded as the "furthest distance that a mosquito could fly". This is said to be an early forerunner of the Green Belt. The space was also used for livestock, exercising ponies and for sporting activity (including cricket).

8. Creation of town, suburban and country building lots.

In existing ports, e.g. Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Lagos and Singapore, the main urban planning activities included road improvements, slum clearance and housing. In protectorates, under indirect rule, attention was given to railway and mining towns. Here the main planning activities were in improving layouts and administration, examples being Port Harcourt, Enugu, Jos, Kaduna, Lusaka and New Delhi. In pre-colonial urban societies in parts of India, Egypt and Palestine, more attention was given to conservation, garden suburbs and parks; using local and native authorities and consultants. Finally, there were the towns where white residents were settling related to private companies such as Vanderbijl Park and Pinelands in South Africa.

Land surveyors, especially army engineers, were responsible for the layout of many cities including Adelaide, Rangoon and Khartoum. Khartoum itself was actually laid out in the pattern of the Union Jack.

A major event in the colonies was a plague pandemic at the end of the 19th Century. This spread through the movements of ships between the ports of the Empire. It became a major reason for the growth of medical officers of health. They then spent their careers demolishing slums seeing these as the cause of the plague, whereas it was fleas from rats in ships' cargoes that were transmitting the disease.

Mention was made of the development of modern dwellings for workers and the work of Sir Stamford Raffles in Singapore and Sir William Simpson. Also Sir Edwin Lutyens and Sir Patrick Geddes; the latter was disliked by the engineers because he espoused the improvement of cities through retaining their best features. The engineers were however intent on driving wide streets through the old parts of the towns. Geddes himself had the philosophy that good town planning was a way to keep the Empire together and loyal. He was regarded as a "peripatetic propagandist" and travelled widely in this role in India and the Middle East.
Special attention was given to the development of archetypal building styles, including ceremonial gateways and the ubiquitous clock towers. The latter were essential because very few people had timepieces, and town clocks enabled the natives to turn up on time for work.

Examples were shown of the development of new building types including: the bungalow; colonnaded buildings with first floors over footways to protect people from rain and sun; stilt housing in flood areas; and barrack developments in the form of cantonments.

Racial segregation was a feature of many towns, especially in Nigeria, and cantonments were one of the earliest expressions of the segregation of foreigner from native and native from native. These stressed the differences of race and class of white colonial masters from the subject population, of white officials from the white business and white working classes, and the indigenous population from the imported workers (i.e. the Malays from the Chinese and Indians in Malaya, and so on).

There followed a very lively and well-informed discussion. This covered the impact of the Garden City concept; the history of the Green Belt; the emergence of high rise housing; the special importance of military towns from the Roman times; slave housing in the West Indies and current developments in Shanghai. Events in the Dutch, French and German colonies were raised. A little-known plan for reconstructing Addis Ababa, by Le Corbusier, was mentioned by the Chairman. Corbusier sent his theoretical project to Mussolini in 1936 as an ideal new capital for the putative 'Italian Empire'. As with the earlier British examples, it was planned on a grid iron pattern segregating the inhabitants into separate quarters by status, class and race.

The use of building codes and town and country planning legislation (copied from the British) was raised. These were clearly vital features of the continuing development of colonial towns and worthy of a separate lecture.

The talk revealed a part of British and overseas urban planning history that was new to many of those attending. It was clear that planning had had a progressive, if paternalistic, influence on the development of the British Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. An influence that is still active today.

[Reporter: Dr John Parker, Chairman of IDF]