

Regions-to Live-in¹

Lewis Mumford²

1895 - 1990

The Author(s) 2018.
This article is published
with Creative Commons
license CC BY-SA 4.0
Firenze University Press.
DOI: 10.13128/contest-10640
www.fupress.net/index.php/contesti/

Riallacciandosi alle radici degli studi regionali, Contesti ripropone il contributo seminale di Lewis Mumford, Regions – To Live In, pubblicato in The Survey nel 1925, dedicato alla critica del piano di Adams per New York, in cui Mumford, esordendo con la frase, "the hope of the city lies outside itself", delinea e anticipa un'idea di regione ispirata alla sostenibilità, al contenimento e alla riorganizzazione dei processi di urbanizzazione:

The hope of the city lies outside itself. Focus your attention on the cities – in which more than half of us live – and the future is dismal. But lay aside the magnifying glass which reveals, for example, the hopelessness of Broadway and Forty-second Street, take up a reducing glass and look at the entire region in which New York lies. The city falls into focus. Forests in the hill – counties water – power in the mid-state valleys, farmland in Connecticut, cranberry bogs in New Jersey enter the picture. To think of all these acres as merely tributary to New York, to trace and strengthen the lines of the web in which the spider-city sits unchallenged, is again to miss the clue. But to think of the region as a whole and the city merely as one of its parts-that may hold promise. Not merely a wistful hope of a better environment, but sheer necessity, leads us thus to change our approach to the problem. For cities, as the foregoing articles show, are becoming too big; as they grow they fall behind in the barest decencies of housing; they become more expensive to operate, more difficult to police, more burdensome to work in, and more impossible to escape from even in the hours of leisure that we achieve. The forces that have created the great cities make permanent improvement within them hopeless; our efforts to plan them

“Regional planning asks not how wide an area can be brought under the aegis of the metropolis, but how the population and civic facilities can be distributed so as to promote and stimulate a vivid, creative life throughout a whole region, a region being any geographic area that possesses a certain unity of climate, soil, vegetation, industry and culture”.

planning asks not how wide an area can be brought under the aegis of the metropolis, but how the population and civic facilities can be distributed so as to promote and stimulate a vivid, creative life throughout a whole region—a region being any geographic area that possesses a certain unity of climate, soil, vegetation, industry and culture. The regionalist attempts to plan such an area so that all its sites and resources, from forest to city, from highland to water level, may be soundly developed, and so that the population will be distributed so as to utilize, rather than to nullify or destroy, its natural advantages. It sees people, industry and the land as a single unit. Instead of trying, by one desperate dodge or another, to make life a little more tolerable in the congested centers, it attempts to determine what sort of

lag pitifully behind the need when indeed they do not foster the very growth that is becoming insupportable. We are providing, in Professor Geddes' sardonic phrase' more and more of worse and worse. Not so with regional planning. Regional

equipment will be needed for the new centers. It does not aim at urbanizing automatically the whole available countryside; it aims equally at ruralizing the stony wastes of our cities. In a sense that will become clear to the reader as he follows the later articles in this number, the civic objective of the regional planning movement is summed up with peculiar accuracy in the concept of the garden-city.

There are a hundred approaches to regional planning; it brings to a head, in fact, a number of movements and methods which have been gathering momentum during the last twenty or thirty years. But each approach has this in common with the others; it attempts to promote a fuller kind of life, at every point in the region.. No form of industry and no type of city are tolerable that take the joy out of life. Communities in which courtship is furtive, in which babies are an unwelcome handicap, in which education, lacking the touch of nature and of real occupations, hardens into a blank routine, in which people achieve adventure only on wheels and happiness only by having their minds “taken off” their daily lives—communities like these do not sufficiently justify our modern advances in science and invention.

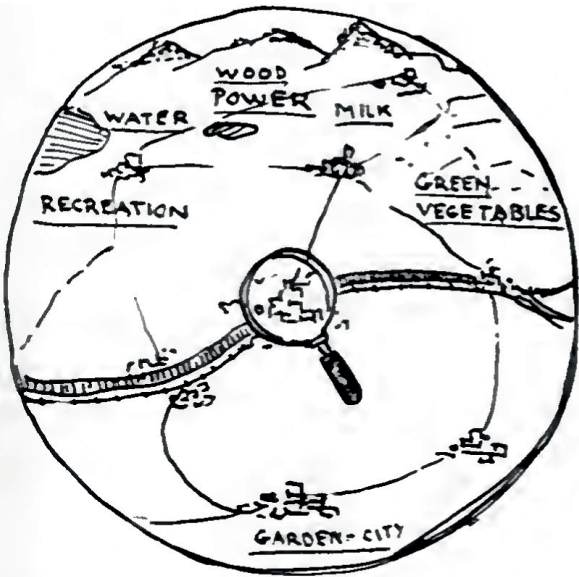
Now the impulse that makes the prosperous minority build country estates, that causes the

Lo sviluppo precipitoso nell'intorno delle nostre grandi città promette solo di rovinare il paesaggio senza soddisfare in modo permanente gli urbani affamati.

well-to-do professional man to move out into the suburbs, the impulse that is driving the family of small means out upon the open road, there to build primitive bungalows regardless of discomfort and dangers to health, seems to us to be a pretty common one. These people are in the vanguard of a general effort to get a little joy back into life. At present this exodus is undertaken blindly and, as Mr. Wright shows, all its promises are illusory, since a helter-skelter development such as is now going on in the countryside around our big cities promises only to spoil the landscape without permanently satisfying the hungry urbanites. The community planning movement in America, and the garden-cities movement, in England are definite attempts to build up a more exhilarating kind of environment-not as a temporary haven of refuge but as a permanent seat of life and culture, urban in its advantages, permanently rural in its situation. This movement toward garden cities is a movement towards a higher type of civilization than that which has created our present congested centers. It involves a



change in aim as well as a change of place. Our present congested districts are the results of the crude applications of the mechanical and mathematical sciences to social development; our garden cities represent fuller development of the more humane arts and sciences-biology and medicine and psychiatry and education and architecture. As modern engineering has made Chicago or New York physically superior to Athens, whilst the labyrinth of subways and high buildings is more deficient for complete living than a Stone Age cave, so we may expect that the cities of tomorrow will not merely embody all that is good in our modern mechanical developments, but also all that was left out in this one-sided existence, all the things that fifth century Athens or thirteenth century Florence,



for all their physical crudity, possessed. On its economic side, this movement towards a fuller human environment goes hand in hand with what has been aptly called the industrial counter revolution. For a hundred years in America business has been concentrating financial resources, concentrating factories and urban districts, attempting to create material prosperity by producing goods which could be quickly "turned over." The paper values have increased enormously even in the brief period from 1900 to 1920; but most statisticians seem agreed that the real wages of the majority of workers have remained nearly stationary. The new industrial revolution is an attempt to spread the real income of industry by decentralizing industry, by removing some of the burden

of the business overhead and sales-promotion, ground rents in congested districts, and so forth. Far-sighted industrialists like Dennison and Ford are already planning this move, and business men like Edward Filene feel that business is at an impasse unless decentralization is followed as "The Way Out". Regional planning is an attempt to turn industrial decentralization – the effort to make the industrial mechanism work better – to permanent social uses. It is an attempt to realize the gains of modern industry in permanent houses, gardens, parks, playgrounds and community institutions. Finally, regional planning is the New Conservation—the conservation of human values hand in hand with natural resources. Regional planning sees that the depopulated countryside and the congested city are intimately related; it sees that we waste vast quantities of time and energy by ignoring the potential resources of a region, that is, by forgetting all that lies between the terminal points and junctions of our great railroads. Permanent agriculture instead of land-skinning, permanent forestry instead

Dopo quasi un secolo possiamo continuare a credere nella capacità della pianificazione regionale? Qualche volta lo abbiamo messo in pratica?

of timber mining, permanent human communities, dedicated to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, instead of camps and squatter-settlements, and to stable building, instead of the scantling and falsework of our "go-ahead" communities – all this is embodied in regional planning. It follows pretty plainly from this summary that, unlike city planning, regional planning is not merely the concern of a profession: it is a mode of thinking and a method of procedure, and the regional plan itself is only a minor technical instrument in carrying out its aims. The planners of the Ontario power project are genuine regional planners; Mr. Ford in his schemes for industrial decentralization is a regional planner; the Pennsylvania State Power Commission, as Mr. Bruère makes clear, is handling an essential element in regional planning. The Chicago Regional Planning Commission with its emphasis on transportation, power and industrial development over wide areas, the Sage Foundation Study in New York with parts of three states included in its "environs" mark the break with our old method treating the city

as a unit by itself. The New York State Housing and Regional Planning Commission has made a series of important preliminary studies which radically cut loose from the older tradition and employ the whole commonwealth rather than the large city as their base.

Moreover the aim of regional planning is not confined to those who are interested in the development of industries and resources. The cultural forces that have begun to challenge the dominance of the big city are plainly working in the same direction. So the little theater movement, by building local centers of culture instead of waiting patiently for the crumbs dropped from our metropolitan table, is essential to regionalism; and in the same way our new experimental schools, which have showed the rich educational opportunities that come from exploring and utilizing the whole living environment rather than sticking to the pallid routine of books, find themselves handicapped in the existing centers and demand a new environment patterned on the human scale, in which the school may work intimately in touch

with the home and with industry and with the surrounding world of nature.

In sum, regional planning does not mean the planning of big cities beyond their present areas; it means the reinvigoration and rehabilitation of whole regions so that the products of culture and civilization, instead of being confined to a prosperous minority in the congested centers, shall be available to everyone at every point in a region where the physical basis for a cultivated life can be laid down. The technical means of achieving this new distribution of power and culture are at hand. The question before us is whether the automatic operation of physical and financial forces is to burke our rising demand for a more vital and happy kind of existence, or whether, by coordinating our efforts and imaginatively grasping our opportunity, we can remold our institutions so as to promote a regional development-development that will eliminate our enormous economic wastes, give a new life to stable agriculture, set down fresh communities planned on a human scale, and, above all, restore a little happiness

and freedom in places where these things have been pretty well wrung out. This is a question that cuts diametrically across a large part of our current political and social problems; some of these it places in a new light, and some of them it makes meaningless. Regionalism or super-congestion? Will man in America learn the art of mastering and ordering his environment, to promote his own fuller purposes, or will he be mastered by his environment, and presently, as in Samuel Butler's picture in *Erewhon*, or in Zamiatin's *We*, find himself without any purposes other than those of the Machine?

Notes

¹ Riproduzione dell'articolo di Lewis Mumford riedito dalla Rivista *Ciudades*, 7, 2002-2003

² Lewis Mumford, uno dei più influenti critici del XX secolo nell'ambito dell'urbanistica, crede ciecamente, o meglio confida, nella capacità del Regional Planning, partendo dal quale qualsiasi forma di intenzione di questo ha come obiettivo quello di promuovere un tipo di vita 'più pieno' per ogni punto del territorio da pianificare, ciò che non equivale a urbanizzare