

The significance of city planning in the U.S. : 1860-1940

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Abstrak

<i>Planning represents a striking controversy in American political life. On one side, planning is maligned while on the other side it is praised. The opponents of planning, or any state intervention, base their rationale on the doctrine of laissez faire. It is argued that the function of the state should be reduced to the lowest minimum consistent with public safety. The role of the state should not be more than that of a modest policeman and should not interfere in the operation of economic processes. Advocates argue that planning is both pragmatic inevitable if citizens are to enjoy -a better and more equitable standard of living.

Despite basic disagreement between the advocates of planning and the defender of laissez-faire, the way as planning has been practiced for about two centuries, it is difficult to determine whether the exercise of planning in the United States restrains or actually perpetuates the existing economic system. As a matter of fact, the degree of disagreement is manifest in the inconsistency of proponents of doctrine of laissez-faire. For example, middle-class businessmen and entrepreneurs often are prepared to see the government step in and prevent profiteering landlords from making what they could from their property (Burns, et al, 1980: 759).

Englishmen Jeremy Bentham, an author in his? The Principles of Moral and Legislation, profoundly elaborated this notion 1789:

To suppose that a stable and beneficent society could emerge unassisted from a company of self-interested ego was...to suppose the impossible. Society, if it was to function properly, needed an organizing principle that would both acknowledge humanity's basic selfishness and at the same time compel people to sacrifice at least a portion of their own interests for the good of the majority ...that every institution, every law, must be measured according to its social usefulness." (Burns, et al, 1980: 759)

Within this context, the haphazard condition of the physical and social order in American cities in the late nineteenth of the century helped to shape the planning movement. The emergence of city planning amidst the social reformers suggests that the government's efforts to control through the planning were due to the inability of the laissez-faire system to adjust or alter the distribution of goods and services. When modern cities emerged at the end of the century, they encountered many unprecedented and severe problems such as residential congestion in the central cities, racial and class conflicts in the central city's ghettos, the eruption of labor violence, shortages and gaps in the city's new infrastructure, and the fact that the capitalistic system was plagued by economic instability. The concerns became more deep-seated as they became harmful the development of American democracy's value. In the context of urban life, the citizens also needed more civic centers to serve as focal points for the growth of a sense of community.

The crisis in America urban structure could best be understood by tracing the historical evolution of

American cities during the development of capital accumulation. From the colonial era (1600s) through 1850, merchant capitalists developed their capital through commercial accumulation. Market place played the most important role where they tried to earn profits-. Colonial cities served their political economic functions, that is colonial control centers and commercial centers as well. Commodities being supplied from producers in hinterland to dispersed markets were collected in and distributed through seaports. Artisans who were the producers of luxury goods conducted their business in cities as the cities facilitated direct access to their wealthy customers.

To maintain that British merchants remained able to control the monopoly over commercial activity, the crown limited the functions of colonial cities. Because of this control the city growth was itself constrained.</i>